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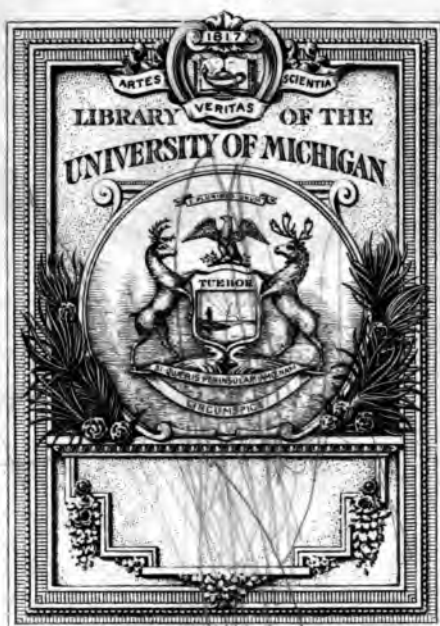
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Fundamental Religious Principles

IN

Browning's Poetry

By W. D. Weatherford, M.A.

*Submitted to the Faculty
of Vanderbilt University
as a Thesis for the Degree
of Doctor of Philosophy.*

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FOREWORD.

ROBERT BROWNING was one of the greatest seers as he was one of the foremost poets of his time. His poetry is a study of the deeper problems of life. These were more to him than all the forms of art. God, Christ, the World, Man, Suffering, Sin—these are in reality the subjects of his thought. They emerge everywhere in his poems. Though he was not professedly a theologian, he has thought more vitally and written more helpfully on the problems of theology than most of the theology makers. Browning saw life. He saw it sanely. He saw it deeply. His starting point was life, his data, the experiences of the human soul. Upon these he reasoned, free from the biases of theological training and the narrowing restrictions of theological method. He touches the great vital truths, and he touches them with a vital touch. He has therefore vital messages on the fundamental problems and principles. His messages will reach and help those who do not read theology—and those who do.

Mr. Weatherford has made a thorough study of Browning's works, has gathered up his views on the great fundamentals, has arranged them in systematic

order, and has put them in plain and lucid prose. Browning interpreted nature, man, life; and Mr. Weatherford has interpreted Browning's interpretation. The result is a fresh and breathing statement of the reality and personality of God, the divine-human and the human-divine of Christ, and an elucidation of the problem of evil—physical and moral—suffering and sin—which, itself out of the ordinary, affords relief and comfort of no ordinary sort.

We most heartily commend this little book to all those who want help in understanding Browning and those who want help in understanding the "mystery of this unintelligible world."

GROSS ALEXANDER.

Nashville, Tenn., May, 1907.

NOTE.—The references in the book are to the Cambridge Edition of Browning's works, in twelve volumes, edited by Porter and Clarke.

INTRODUCTION.

It is the glory and good of Art,
That Art remains the one way possible
Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine at least.¹

THERE is in the heart of every man a philosophy of life which is struggling for expression. This philosophy, sometimes crude, sometimes more finished, is perpetually expressing itself in the life work of the individual man. The long-drawn dissertation of the philosopher is his attempt to say how he sees life. The exquisite workmanship of the artist is but the outpouring on the canvas of that ideal of life which absorbs his heart. Not less than these, and even more of necessity than either of them, every great poem becomes a more or less perfect expression of some part of the poet's philosophy. The deeper and more absorbing that philosophy, the more difficult will be its expression. It is difficult in that the forms of

¹"The Book and the Ring," VII. 329.

the syllogism do not easily lend themselves to poetic expression, and the visions of poetry are not easily reduced to the categories of logic. Browning had no intention of writing a philosophy, but filled as his mind was with the philosophical discussions of his time, the content of his writing must be, from the very nature of the man, a discussion of the great realities of life. On the other hand, the form of his thought could only shape itself in poetry. As the poet grew older he came to feel that some truths could be accurately and adequately expressed in this form alone. Truth is so complex that to see it rightly we must view it from many sides, each facet reflecting a new and changing beauty. To present separately these various phases occasions seeming contradiction, but when all are combined in a single conception they give a more satisfactory expression of truth than could ever be attained by a logical process. The fact that Browning does thus view truth from every direction has given rise to many contradictory opinions concerning the value and content of his poetry. He has been charged with heresy

by such a writer as Strong²; by others he has been heralded as the greatest Christian poet of modern times. Some have thought him an agnostic, while others have considered him a devout believer. This very fact of the misunderstanding of his message may justify a somewhat more careful investigation of the fundamental conceptions of our author's poetry. In the following chapters we propose, therefore, to discuss five essentially religious conceptions, though other conceptions may at times be involved and receive some attention. A careful study of Browning's thought of God, the Christ, the Devil, the Origin and Nature of Evil, and the Purpose of Evil, ought to make more clear the meaning of his message to men. Given these fundamental conceptions, it will not be hard for each one to construct for himself the poet's philosophy of religion. Such a philosophy is necessary to a complete understanding of the message of any great poet.

In working out these religious ideas, we at once meet with two serious difficulties. The

²"The Great Poets and Their Theology," p. 437.

first is common in all poetry, and consists in the fact that Art is a law unto itself. The critical methods used in interpreting philosophy cannot be used in the same way in interpreting poetry; for while poetry may give expression to a philosophy of life, it has ends in itself which transcend, in the mind of the poet at least, all philosophies. We are in constant danger, therefore, of destroying our poetry in wrenching from it a philosophy. With this thought in mind, it seems wise to let the poet himself write for us his philosophy, giving to the present volume somewhat the appearance of a bundle of quotations. And this suggests the further difficulty which is, in a sense, peculiar to Browning. When poetry is dramatic in form, how are we to know when the poet is speaking his own convictions? This becomes a most important question in the interpretation of Browning, since he writes dramatically in almost all his poems. Only now and then does he throw off the dramatic veil and stand forth speaking for himself. No law of interpretation can be laid down and slavishly followed, but it seems necessary at least to have

in mind some general principles in accordance with which we shall draw our conclusions. In the first place, there are some thoughts which appear in a very great variety of poems. Thus, the thought of the Incarnation, as will be seen in the chapter on The Christ, has been most clearly presented in the parleyings of a Dervish, in the letter of a Greek, in the prophecy of a Patriarch, and in the dialogue of a doubting yet earnest Christian. All of these poems would not present this thought repeatedly if it did not appeal to the poet. The frequency with which a thought occurs is a good test of its genuine relation to the writer.

Then again, the relation of a thought to the writer's belief may be determined by noting whether he expresses it sympathetically or conventionally. Those passages which contain truth in harmony with the poet's own mind are more apt to glow with poetic fire than are the statements not in accord with the poet's belief. Hence many passages glowing with fervor may be considered as representing the poet, even though they are spoken by dramatic personages. In this, the essential point of interpretation

would be to discover whether or not a passage is put sympathetically. This is a sense which must be acquired by much reading and a deep love of Browning's poetry.

Further, it seems only fair, since we are dealing with poetry and not with formal logic, to put that interpretation on a passage which will give to it greatest beauty and strength. Thus in some passages where a reference is made to the devil, we will see that the poetry requires us to consider it as referring to temptation or evil tendency, rather than to a personal being, if we do not wish to do violence to the beauty of the verse. Lastly, we may search his personal poems to find the author's own thought. Yet, even in this, we cannot lay down an absolute rule, for there is some question as to what poems are personal. Professor Henry Jones thinks the number of personal poems in which we can find Browning's philosophy are four, namely: "Christmas Eve," "Easter Day," "La Saisiaz," and "One Word More." To this number, however, should be added Part III. of "Dramatis Personæ," Books I. and XII. of "The Ring and the Book," Pro-

logue to second series of "Dramatic Idyls," Prologue to "Jocoseria," Epilogue to "Ferish-ta's Fancies," "The Guardian Angel," and Epilogue to "Asolando." Most of the other personal poems are lyrics dedicated to individuals, criticisms of the poetic art, or poems general in their content. These are "Sordello," Book III., lines 593-1022, "Development," "Waring," "Women and Roses," "May and Death," the closing lines of "Balaustion's Adventure," Prologue to "Fifine at the Fair," Prologue to "Pacchiarotto," Epilogue to "Pacchiarotto," "Never the Time and the Place," "Pambo," "To Edward Fitzgerald," "Why I am a Liberal," and "House." In addition to these there are many other poems considered semi-personal, such as "Pauline," parts of "Fifine at the Fair," the Pope in "The Ring and the Book," to which we must apply the general principles of interpretation.

It should be noted in the very beginning that the topics chosen for discussion are so inter-related as to be more or less dependent each upon all the others. This will be most readily seen in the last two chapters, since no theory

of evil can be complete which does not take into consideration the nature of the supreme force in the universe. The five chapters, therefore, should be considered as a whole, each throwing light upon the other.

The feeling that Browning has a great message for our time, which message is not always understood, has led to this discussion. If the following chapters as a whole can help to make clear some of the fundamental conceptions on which his philosophy of life was based, we shall be more than satisfied.

**FUNDAMENTAL RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLES IN
BROWNING'S POETRY.**

1. The first part of the document is a list of names and addresses of the members of the committee.

2. The second part of the document is a list of names and addresses of the members of the committee.

3. The third part of the document is a list of names and addresses of the members of the committee.

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CHAPTER I.

THE IDEA OF GOD.

AMONG the fundamental religious conceptions presented to us in Browning's poetry, the place of first importance is easily claimed by the Idea of God. This idea stands first because of its large influence on the life of the man, because of the varied and beautiful expression it finds in his poetry, and because of its determining influence on the other beliefs of his life.

There can be no doubt that Browning believed in a personal God. In his first published poem, "Pauline," the lode-star of the hero was

A need, a trust, a yearning after God;¹

and after much sin this hero could say:

[I] still trusted in a hand to lead me through
All danger.²

The speaker in "Reverie"—the last but one of Browning's poems—passed all laws to give

¹"Pauline," I. 11. ²*Ibid.*, I. 11.

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praise to Omnipotence, Lord of laws; and there are few intervening poetic characters that do not give expression to a belief in God. To the poet the question was one hardly admitting of debate, and usually in his poems the existence of a personal God is assumed as an accepted truth. In "La Saisiaz" he raised the double question of a future life and the existence of God, but the whole discussion is taken up with the first, and the second seems to be taken for granted.

Question, answer presuppose

Two points: that the thing itself which questions, answers,—is, it knows;

As it also knows the thing perceived outside itself,—force

Actual ere its own beginning, operative through its course,

Unaffected by its end,—that this thing likewise need must be;

Call this—God, then, call that—soul, and both—the only facts for me.*

This is one of the most philosophic of Browning's poems, written rather late in life when the poet is said by Professor Henry Jones

*"La Saisiaz," XI. 83.

to have declared all knowledge a failure; but in it there is an element of certainty concerning God. Browning, however, was anything but dogmatic. He had too great a dramatic ability of putting himself in the position of another to be a thoroughgoing dogmatist. He held most tenaciously to his own opinions, but he did not expect other men to accept them as correct simply because he believed them. In attempting, therefore, to formulate his conception of God, we are not shut up to bare statements of belief, but may here and there catch glimpses of the more fully outlined arguments by which he arrived at his conclusions. Philosopher as he was, we are not surprised that his thought should have followed at times the line of the arguments of the old schools, at least in so far as he considered them valid.*

*For convenience of reference it may be well to give in a paragraph the three stock arguments for the existence of God, keeping in mind that they are useful only as confirmatory evidence.

1. *Cosmological*: The world in which we live is contingent, therefore there must be an unconditioned and necessary power above it. Or more commonly it is stated in the terms of effect and cause. Since the world

As he looked about him he saw a vast universe revealing great power and wisdom. All nature spoke a language of greatness, and to think of nature without an intelligent cause was impossible. The hypothesis of a number of independent elements which were from the beginning, and which were subject to certain general laws, as they acted upon each other in bringing about the present status of creation was not satisfactory.

is not self-creative, there must be some cause to give it existence. The argument attempts to prove that this cause is an ultimate and infinite cause. The failure of the argument consists in the fact that we cannot draw the conclusion of an infinite cause from the premise of finite effects. We can only legitimately conclude some more powerful cause, which cause may still be finite and so with an endless series of causes. The argument is valuable only as it shows the direction in which the mind must travel in going from the finite to the infinite. It can deny the finality of the finite, but cannot posit the infinite.

2. *Teleological*: This argument takes as its point of departure the conformity of all created things to a w end. It is commonly known as the design argument and attempts to prove that all creation is the result of an intelligent first cause. This argument breaks down because from experience we cannot prove or even believe—apart from our belief in a wise God, which it

What made and drives
The sun is force, is law, is named, not known,*

was the thought which the dying John declared to be false. There must be something more than mere force behind the workings of nature. It must be an intelligent cause which could create such a universe. Thus Paracelsus in that great poetic theory of evolution learns to say:

argument attempts to establish—that there is a wise design running through all creation. There are some aberrations which cannot be explained away save by positing an all-wise Designer who would not create things awry.

3. *Ontological*: The existence of God is involved in our thought of him. The fact of the conception is inherently correlative with the objective reality. The old answer, that, because I think a perfectly round island, does not prove its existence, will hardly be considered a valid objection. The accidental existence of any object of sense cannot, of course, be inferred from the thought. But Descartes gave to this argument the form of cause and effect. Since there is nothing finite that can originate the idea of the infinite, there must be an existing infinite who gave to my finite mind the thought. Then, if we mean that all conscious life is dependent on a universal self-consciousness, we arrive at a proof which is not easily refuted.

"A Death in the Desert," V. 195.

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God tastes an infinite joy
In infinite ways—one everlasting bliss,
From whom all being emanates, all power
Proceeds.*

Unlike Wordsworth, Browning rarely wrote of nature for its own sake. When woven into his verse it usually bears close relation to God and man, since the poet's love for nature and reverence for its varied manifestations grew out of his deep, abiding faith that in nature God, as Creator, is revealing himself to man. But not only is nature a manifestation of God, it is a growing revelation, for through it runs a wise design. As "progress is the law of life," so development is the law of the universe. There may be discords, but they are only indications of a deeper harmony, pervading all, which we do not understand. God animates all nature, making it divine.

Thus he dwells in all,
From life's minute beginnings, up at last
To man.⁷

It is precisely the fact that Paracelsus did not recognize this truth in early life that accounts

*"Paracelsus," I. 159. ⁷*Ibid.*, I. 160.

for his partial failure. In his blind, stumbling way he went counter to the very things he most desired to find. Not knowing that a wise design was bringing all things to a perfect end, he failed

To trace love's faint beginnings in mankind,
To know even hate is but a mask of love's,
To see a good in evil, and a hope
In ill success.^a

He came to see all of these things only through experience with life in its various forms.

The speaker in "Christmas Eve," who flung himself out of the chapel in such disgust, found peace and soothing in the presence of nature, for God was there permeating all with love and bringing all to a most perfect end.

No: love which, on earth, amid all the shows of it,
Has ever been seen the sole good of life in it,
The love, ever growing there, spite of the strife in it,
Shall arise, made perfect, from death's repose of it.
And I shall behold thee, face to face,
O God, and in thy light retrace
How in all I loved here, still wast thou!^b

The optimistic creed of our poet rested just upon this view of the world. However much

^a"Paracelsus," I. 166. ^b"Christmas Eve," IV. 297.

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of sorrow or pain or suffering there might be, all was designed to lead life to its higher perfection. Nor is there any permanent thwarting of this supreme purpose. Even though failure seemed sure, it was only apparent failure.

My own hope is, a sun will pierce
The thickest cloud earth ever stretched;
That, after Last, returns the First,
Though a wide compass round be fetched;
That what began best, can't end worst,
Nor what God blessed once, prove accurst.¹⁰

The more significant thought of the All-Creator is found when the poet begins to wonder whence man has sprung. There can be but one answer found:

Before me was my Cause—that's styled
God: after, in due course succeeds the rest.¹¹

Starting with knowledge of his own consciousness, man can project that knowledge into the past only far enough to see that there is some cause without, giving rise to that which is within. The mere thought of being the ulti-

¹⁰"Apparent Failure," V. 275.

¹¹"Francis Furini," XII. 132.

mate existence, of commanding for commanding's sake, as the ultimate authority, makes his soul sick.

The last point I can trace is—rest beneath
Some better essence than itself [the soul] in weakness.¹²

As late as the period of "The Ring and the Book" we hear Browning giving beautiful expression to the same thought through the words of the Pope:

Yet my poor spark had for its source, the sun.¹³

Then again Browning was not willing to acknowledge that the ontological argument was of no value. In "A Death in the Desert" we have the Cartesian form of this argument presented. If there is no God, whence came this conception of him. At least we can rely on this to strengthen the belief which may be established by other methods.

But these arguments for the existence of God were not enough to satisfy. There must be a nearer approach to God than could be found in these. The intuition supplied such an avenue of approach. There is something

¹²"Pauline," I. 27. ¹³"The Pope," VII. 202.

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within man that reaches above and takes hold on God. It is not based on argument, for it transcends all processes of reasoning and comes at once to the object of its desire. It is in every human heart, and cannot be smothered.

Like plants in mines which never saw the sun,
But dream of him, and guess where he may be,
And do their best to climb and get to him,¹⁴

so we have that within us that makes us grope upward toward our God. We may never have seen him by reasoning, but our hearts yearn for him and we must feel after him, if haply we may find him. Paracelsus, with his strongly emotional nature, feels he is guided by an unseen hand. There is no mistaking the fact of God's existence. Intuition is sufficient to make him say:

I know, I felt (perception unexpressed,
Uncomprehended by our narrow thought,
But somehow felt and known in every shift
And change in the spirit,—nay, in every pore
Of the body, even),—what God is, what we are,
What life is.¹⁵

The lonely Moor is so sensitive to the spir-

¹⁴"Paracelsus," I. 166. ¹⁵*Ibid.*, I. 159.

itual influences of life that he feels the Florentines are cold and heartless. They do not see God as he sees him and as his people see him.

How nearer God we were! He glows above
With scarce an intervention, presses close
And palpitatingly, his soul o'er ours:
We feel him, nor by painful reason know!¹⁶

Pompilia was not permitted to know much. She could not reason deeply, and yet by her intuition she attained to more of godlikeness than all the priests of learned and reasoning powers. The Pope looking upon her beautiful character marvels at its perfection. All of power, all of reasoning, all of the knowledge of God which others may have attained, make not up a soul like hers,

Earth's flower

She holds up to the softened gaze of God.¹⁷

"La Saisiaz" is a poem given to a very philosophic discussion of our relation to God and future life. In this poem Browning starts with the determination to seek the truth about these things, and it makes no difference what that truth may be. But after going through all the

¹⁶"Luria," III. 252. ¹⁷"The Pope," VII. 194.

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arguments, the truth arrived at is only a hope. It is not demonstrable knowledge. However, this is satisfactory, for as he says in the first of the poem:

Weakness never needs be falseness: truth is truth in
each degree—

Thunder-pealed by God to Nature, whispered by my
soul to me.¹⁸

Browning was aware of the fact that most of the people who knew God had arrived at that knowledge, not through long study of philosophy, not even through the revelation of the Testaments, but through that inner revelation of the heart which was given to every one. Nor did he consider this kind of knowledge in any way inferior to that which might be attained by more difficult processes. In fact, the older he grew and the more he pondered this question, the more was he convinced that we must rely on the inner light as our surest guide in finding God.

The form and content of this intuitive conception was, with Browning, largely determined by the needs of his own nature. It would be

¹⁸"La Saisiaz," XI. 79.

difficult to find a more beautiful expression of this view of God than that given us in his earliest poem. There, we can feel the very pulse-beat of passion, as the restless soul cries out:

O God, where do they tend—these struggling aims?¹⁹

And the answer is:

Even from myself

I need thee and I feel thee and I love thee.
I do not plead my rapture in thy works
For love of thee, nor that I feel as one
Who cannot die: but there is that in me
Which turns to thee, which loves or which should love.²⁰

The true Christian man in "Easter Day" fears to trust the wants and needs of the human heart as a guide to real belief, and the poor pagan in "Cleon" with yearning heart, but pessimistic mood, looks up to a dead Zeus for the revelation of a future life and a fuller joy. This not having been revealed, he supposes his heart yearns for that which is not. It is not hard in either case, however, to see the poet's feeling; that both, though groping in the dark, were at least groping upward. With burning

¹⁹"Pauline," I. 26. ²⁰*Ibid.*, I. 27.

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rapture and full hope he would have the pagan say :

I dare at times imagine to my need
Some future state revealed to us by Zeus,
Unlimited in capability
For joy, as this is in desire for joy,—
To seek which, the joy-hunger forces us :
That, stung by straightness of our life, made straight
On purpose to make prized the life at large—
Freed by the throbbing impulse we call death,
We burst there as the worm into the fly,
Who, while a worm still, wants his wings.²¹

If there be no reality of God giving to us a future life corresponding to this yearning in man's heart, then indeed is this life one of deepest sorrow and this world one "reflex of the devil's doings." The deepest feelings of life not only give the greatest joy, but they furnish the acutest pain, and we choose that pain rather than anything else in the world, "because our souls see it is good." It is good because there is reality corresponding to it, and because we have faith that these nobler parts of our being are but the faint gleams of the far-off sun caught and mirrored in our souls.

²¹"Cleon" V. 90.

O Thou,—as representing here to me,
In such conception as my soul allows,—
Under Thy measureless, my atom width!—
Man's mind, what is it but a convex glass
Wherein are gathered all the scattered points
Picked out of the immensity of sky,
To reunite there, be our heaven for earth,
Our known unknown, our God revealed to man?²²

By some divine process God has written his own life in our hearts, and we are like him in desire. It is just this fact that lends such wonderful significance to man's yearning after God. It is this fact that makes that conception of God the truest, which interprets him in terms of human life. There is, to be sure, a partial revelation of God in nature; philosophy may give us abstract ideas about him, but that truth becomes vital to us only when it "becomes flesh and dwells among us."

Take all in a word: the truth in God's breast
Lies trace for trace upon ours impressed:
Though he is so bright and we so dim,
We are made in his image to witness him.²³

This does not, of course, give absolute demonstrable knowledge, but that is neither nec-

²²"The Pope," VII. 203. ²³"Christmas Eve," IV. 317.

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essary nor possible. Men are ever growing higher and purer in soul life, and as man's own soul grows, the conception of God, which it shadows forth, must also grow. This does not mean that the older conceptions were false; they were only relatively inferior. They were the projection of man's highest self in each successive age, just as our own present conceptions are the projection of our own truest soul life. Caliban's religion was for him as true as our own is for us, but it was relatively inferior.

All things suffer change save God the Truth.
Man apprehends him newly at each stage
Whereat earth's ladder drops, its service done.²⁴

The best illustration of this anthropomorphic interpretation of God is found in the growing revelation of the Old Testament. Each successive ideal in this wonderful narrative is the embodiment of the highest national and individual attributes which had existed up to that time. In the early history of Israel, God is a God of battles. Later he becomes an administrator of justice; still later he is a God of love

²⁴"A Death in the Desert," V. 196.

and mercy. So the ideal grew as manhood developed and the people had a greater national life, until at last Isaiah could break forth in that climax of prophecy concerning the one who should represent God:

He shall be called Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.⁸⁵

More than any other poet of his time, perhaps, Browning recognized the truth of this anthropomorphic element in religion, and more than once he gave what seems an almost perfect expression to it. One of the most beautiful of these is found in "Saul":

'Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry for! my flesh,
that I seek
In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it
shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like
to me,
Thou shalt love and be loved by, forever: a Hand like
this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See
the Christ stand!⁸⁶

There are those, however, who think that such a view of God has no truth in it. It is

⁸⁵Isaiah ix. 6. ⁸⁶"Saul," IV. 85.

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merely a fiction made to appease the heart of man. There may be beauty in it, but there is no reality corresponding to it. The dying John, in "A Death in the Desert," foresees just this thought:

Must Christ then be?

Has he been? Did not we ourselves make him?
Our mind receives but what it holds, no more.
First of the love, then; we acknowledge Christ—
A proof we comprehend his love, a proof
We had such love already in ourselves,
Knew first what else we should not recognize.
'Tis mere projection from man's inmost mind,
And, what he loves, thus falls reflected back,
Becomes accounted somewhat out of him;
He throws it up in air, it drops down earth's,
With shape, name, story added, man's old way.²⁷

John's answer to this is, that if Power has not love and the other attributes found in man, then man, possessing them, becomes himself the God, for he is greater than that force which created him. But a power which has the attributes of love and wisdom must be more than an impersonal force, it is a personal being. To Browning it was a valid process to arrive at a knowledge of God in this way:

²⁷"A Death in the Desert," V. 194, 195.

Since if man prove the sole existent thing
Where these combine, whatever their degree,
However weak the might or will or love,
So they may be found there, put in evidence,—
He is as surely higher in the scale
Than any might with neither love nor will,
As life, apparent in the poorest midge,
Is marvelous beyond Atlas' self—

Thus, man proves best and highest—God, in fine,
And thus the victory leads but to defeat,
The gain to loss, best rise to the worst fall,
His life becomes impossible, which is death.²⁸

It is a contradiction when a man says there is
a need in his heart which must have had a
cause and yet denies the very cause which alone
could create that need.

How shall ye help this man who knows himself,
That he must love and would be loved again,
Yet, owning his own love that proveth Christ,
Rejecteth Christ through very need of him?²⁹

The same answer is given in "The Sun,"
where the old Dervish is trying to make clear
that we can have no real conception of God
save in the form of our own personality. The

²⁸"A Death in the Desert," V. 200.

²⁹*Ibid.*, V. 198, 199.

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fact that we cannot ever understand how this is possible makes no difference.

Fitlier thou saidst "I stand appalled before
Conception unattainable by me
Who need it most"—than this—"What? boast he holds
Conviction where I see conviction's need,
Alas,—and nothing else? then what remains
But that I straightway curse, cuff, kick the fool?"⁸⁰

For Browning, as we have said, there was really no valid objection to this anthropomorphic view, and upon it he not only built his truest thought of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, but he also made it the point of departure in working out more perfectly those attributes of God which determined very largely his view of the problem of life. Every need in man must find a response in God, else life would be a failure. Just as every invention may be considered as the transposing of man's attributes into mechanical form, even so man—the creation of God—may be considered the being into whom God has transposed his own attributes and spiritual nature. These attributes may be very crude as found

⁸⁰"The Sun," XII. 20.

in man, but the leap from "man's nothing perfect to God's all-complete" was not a very difficult one for a nature like Browning. This does not limit God to the small compass of man's life, it only tries to define such of the attributes of God's nature as could give rise to those in man. What other noble attributes God may have, reaching on far beyond anything which man possesses, we do not know. We only hope that with the growth of man's soul, one by one, these also will probably develop in his nature, until man shall really be "made in His image to witness Him." And we know that this process is going on, for love which has come to mean so much to us was hardly known in the early ages. Other attributes are likewise developing.

Most prominent among all the attributes of God was that of power. We most easily arrive at a conception of this all-powerful Creator by comparing man's finite power with his infinite desire. Weak as man is, there is yet enough power to give a contrast, on which we can build in thought an All-powerful One. But if this ability which inheres in man is the

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basis for this belief, we must go further to find a more complete manifestation of it. If we read "Paracelsus," we shall see the wrath sea's waves, edged with foam, white as the bitten lip of hate; the bursting of the spring like a smile striving with a wrinkled face; the upward soaring of the lark shivering for very joy; and we shall hear the voices of the forest and the wise discussion of the herded pines, as God in power renews his ancient rapture. From the tiniest insect with its perfectly wrought functions up to "man the consummation of this scheme of being," there is not one creature that does not declare God's power.

Soar the conceivable height,
Find cause to match the effect in evidence,
Conjecture of the worker by the work:
Is there strength there?—enough.³¹

Many of Browning's contemporaries, we know, held to the thought of an abstract power which, acting in accordance with certain universal and uniform laws, brought about just these results which he attributes to a personal

³¹"The Pope," VII. 204, 205.

God. But he was never affected by such theories. In all of his poetry we cannot recall an expression where he sets forth belief in a materialistic force in opposition to a personal being. On the other hand, he proclaims most strongly, in such poems as "A Death in the Desert" and "The Sun," the thought that a blind force is inconceivable. For man to suppose might can exist without either will or love, as we have it pointed out so clearly,³² is to make himself a God; for, having all of these himself, he is greater than any impersonal being called natural law. To be sure he dwells in all, from life's minute beginnings up at last to man, as an animating and active force. Evolution is a process of development, but it is a process guided by the hand of a personal God. The old Greek idea of the sun chariot was crude enough, but not so crude as the thought of those who see mere force behind its rising and its setting! Nor is this personal power limited in its field of operation. If it is manifest in the world processes, it is equally seen and felt

³²"A Death in the Desert," V. 195.

in the personal affairs of men. As David thinks of how he would help Saul, he is sad because he has not the power, but suddenly he realizes that he should not doubt that he (God) alone will help him who yet alone can. The fact of the omnipotence of God was very real to Browning. In conversation with Mrs. Orr, he once said: "The evidences of divine power are everywhere about us."⁸⁸

As from man's limited power Browning passed to the unlimited power of God, so in the consideration of omniscience we may take our departure from man's partial knowledge in moving toward God's all-complete. The Pope tells us that man's mind is but a mirror wherein is reflected the mind of God. The intellectual process which consists in grasping at mistake considered truth, and ever yearning to attain unto truth, is called the gift of God, in "A Death in the Desert."

Earlier poets had talked of the wonders of nature, but Browning swept all of these things aside and called man to the realization of his

⁸⁸Contemporary Review, LX. 879.

own majesty. Man left out, all earth was a worthless void.

Man's breath evoked the beautiful,
then,

Touched aright, prompt yields each particle its tongue
Of elemental flame."⁴⁴

Nature without a thinking mind to interpret it is nothing. It is dead and useless. It is as music where no ear listens, or beauty where no eye sees. But when man steps upon the stage, every process of nature takes on a new significance. It is the fact of this knowledge that transforms the voices of the earth:

The winds
Are henceforth voices, wailing or a shout,
A querulous mutter or a quick gay laugh,
Never a senseless gust now man is born."⁴⁵

But this thought does not end in the exaltation of man. It must go further than that. If nature finds its true significance only in the presence of the mind of man, then the Creator of nature who designed it for the pleasure and development of that mind must have been an

⁴⁴"Fine at the Fair," IX. 106. ⁴⁵"Paracelsus," I. 161.

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Intelligent Being. The exaltation of the Divine Mind is even further impressed upon us when we think of how little man can understand the processes which are going on about him.

Have I knowledge? confounded it shrivels at Wisdom laid bare.

Have I forethought? how purblind, how blank, to the Infinite Care!⁸⁶

The finiteness of man's mind not only compels him to find an Infinite Intelligence in the interpretation of nature, but it forces him to believe that behind all these forces of nature, with the eternal harmony of their workings, there must be a perfect Intelligence. The processes of evolution alone are ample proof that over all there rules a God without limit in thought and power of execution. When this subject is discussed in "Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau," and some one seems to suggest that the theory of evolution places man on a level with the brutes, the Prince at once replies that it would seem so if we only take this short life into account; for men hurry into life, without due

⁸⁶"Saul," IV. 81.

preparation, shuffle through their part on the stage as best they can, but that best is very poor. But this life is not all of man; it is only a course of training. What God has in store for each individual may be judged by the development of the race. Here God takes time, nor tries to build a nation in a day, nor create a civilization in a century. Just here it is that the process of evolution speaks so clearly of an omniscient Creator.

It is no mean Intelligence which can look through thousands of years and lay a scheme of forces, the working out of which will produce a perfect race. A lesser intelligence would begin with the present, trying to make these forces fashion each individual into perfection; but God sees that the perfect race means more, and not only so, but only by bringing it to perfection can he give to each individual his truest place in life. As it is well that all life should pass through infinite change in order that it may be molded into perfect shape and use, so it is well that man should pass through many stages of experience in order to be fitted for his station in life.

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I like the thought He should have lodged me once
I' the hole, the cave, the hut, the tenement,
The mansion, and the palace; made me learn
The feel o' the first, before I found myself
Loftier i' the last.⁸⁷

If one goes entirely through Browning's poems, in search for passages expressing his belief in an omniscient Creator, those passages would be few as compared with those bearing on some other attributes of the divine nature. This is not because of any doubt on the part of the poet; it was rather because he felt so sure of it that it seemed unnecessary to re-affirm it. In one of his last poems we find these words:

Knowledge obtained Power praise.
Had Good been manifest,
Broke out in cloudless blaze,
Unchequered as unrepressed,
In all things Good at best—
Then praise—all praise, no blame—
Had hailed the perfection.⁸⁸

Here we see what troubled our poet was proof of the beneficence of God, and not the

⁸⁷"Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau," IX. 32.

⁸⁸"Reverie," XII. 265.

proof of his power and wisdom. He believed God to be a God of love, but the proof was difficult. If God was all-wise and could see exactly the needs of man; if he could see every act in the light of its effects; if he was all-powerful; how, then, could he be all-loving when sin and suffering seemed so universal? The answer to this question will help us very much in a later chapter to find his solution of the problem of evil. There is no lack of material from which to form his answer, for he refers to it in almost every poem. No one can read these poems without feeling absolutely sure that Browning's conviction was settled, and that he believed in a God of love; but nevertheless there always seems to linger just a little doubt as to the proof. It may be well in the outset to determine what is meant by love. Professor Royce, in his paper on "Paracelsus" read before the Boston Browning Society,³⁹ points out quite clearly that love has for Browning a pregnant meaning. It is not mere sentiment; it is not the simple attraction between

³⁹"The Boston Browning Society Papers," p. 221.

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the sexes, but it is the aspiration, the passion, the yearning of a personal being, for absolute perfection. In God it would then be the desire to see perfection in every man, which perfection would be the fulfillment of his scheme of being. We have before quoted from "Paracelsus" an expression about the plant growing in the mine, never having seen the sun, but groping after him, which was to Browning a perfect type of love. In order that the plant may seek the sun, there must be that in the latter which draws the plant to itself. In order that man may love God and desire to be loved by him in turn, there must be love in the heart of God to draw out this affection of man. He must sympathize with the yearnings of the human soul; more, he must know the feelings as self-conscious experience. This he did and does, through the Incarnate Christ. Here again we find Browning turning to his anthropomorphic view to get assurance. David loves Saul with a passion all-consuming, and as he dwells on what he feels and would do for his friend he is suddenly stopped by the thought:

Do I find love so full in my nature, God's ultimate gift,
That I doubt his own love can compete with it?

Here, the parts shift?

Here, the creature surpass the Creator,—the end, what
began?

Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all for this
man,

And dare doubt he alone shall not help him, who yet
alone can?⁴⁰

The inconceivableness of a God without love
is again stated in "A Death in the Desert," to
which we have before referred, where it is
shown that if man has love and God has not,
then man is the God after all, and God dwindle
into cold law. The speaker in "Christmas
Eve," as he looks into the blue heavens, knows
what it is to yearn for a God of love:

I found God there, his visible power;
Yet felt in my heart, amid all its sense
Of the power, an equal evidence
That his love, there too, was a nobler dower.
For the loving worm within its clod
Were diviner than a loveless god
Amid his worlds, I will dare to say.⁴¹

His ripest conviction on this subject is
found in "Reverie," which was written after

⁴⁰"Saul," IV. 82, 83. ⁴¹"Christmas Eve," IV., 294, 295.

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his mind had gone over all the philosophic arguments on both sides:

From the first, Power was—I knew.
Life has made clear to me
That, strive but for closer view,
Love were as plain to see.⁴²

In the foregoing discussion we have thought it necessary to give only the main outlines of thought which lead to the complete poetic conception of God. It now only remains to determine what can be known about Browning's religious opinions, from sources other than his poems. If we had only his essay on Shelley from which to draw, we are quite sure we should call Browning an orthodox, though liberal, Christian. One does not hesitate to call him a Christian, but he surely was not a conventional Christian. He rarely attended religious exercises when in the city,—though his introduction to Thomas Jones's "Divine Order" clearly indicates his appreciation of strong sermons,—but when in the country, or on his visits to the universities, he rarely ever missed a service. The freedom of worship in the country

⁴²"Reverie," XII. 267.

and its lack of formalism and conventionality seemed to have appealed to him very strongly. He did not believe in a mechanical revelation to man, since this would have been, according to his way of thinking, the destruction of all religious life. Anything that would take away the basis of faith and give absolute knowledge would make all religion non-moral. He, however, had a deep respect for the Bible; held that those parts,—and that meant about all of it,—which were true interpretations of God in terms of human life, were valid. It is said that no one of his time enjoyed reading the Bible more than he. Surely we have evidence of his sympathetic knowledge both of the Old and the New Testaments in his poems.

His attitude toward God was one of love and reverence. Mrs. Orr says of him: "He never lost what was for him the consciousness of a supreme Eternal Will." But an Eternal Will was not enough to satisfy him. He must have something that was loving, tender, personal. Mrs. Orr quotes him as saying to her: "That love could only reveal itself to the human heart by some supreme act of human tenderness and

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devotion; the fact or fancy of Christ's cross would alone supply such a revelation."⁴³ With him it was doubtless fact and not fancy.

That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,
Or decomposes, but to recompose,
Become my universe that feels and knows.⁴⁴

When he had read this to Mrs. Orr, turning he said: "That face is the face of Christ. That is how I know and feel him."⁴⁵ Ultimately we see it was through the Christ-life that Browning came to a full knowledge of a personal, loving heavenly Father.

⁴³Contemporary Review, LX. 879.

⁴⁴Epilogue (to "Dramatis Personæ"), V. 280.

⁴⁵Contemporary Review, LX. 880.

CHAPTER II.

CHRIST THE REVELATION OF GOD.

IN the first chapter we attempted to show that Browning believed in a God of love, and that he arrived at this conclusion through the conception of a loving, suffering Christ. It is here our purpose to develop more fully this last conception.

There is probably no more significant period of religious thought in England than the fifty years just following 1820. It was a period during which many schools of varying theology arose. These religious movements were pregnant not only with changing ideals, but with new and vital thought. One needs only to mention the names of Whately, Arnold, Pusey, Coleridge, Carlyle, Maurice, Kingsley, and Robertson—all of whom were prolific in their discussions of the religious problems of the day—to see how very full this period is of such vital religious energy. It is rather a sig-

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nificant fact that Robert Browning lived in a time of such profound theological thought without being drawn into it. He spent most of these years (after 1846) in Italy, and was too far away to catch the contagion of the movement. He, however, could not escape entirely. The atmosphere was too full of ferment for any active mind not to be affected to a certain extent. The whole meaning of "A Death in the Desert" hangs upon the restless condition of thought and speculation at the time it was written. The poem presents a period of doubt following close upon the apostolic era, but that period was a direct prototype of the time when Browning wrote, a time when the old traditions of the mediæval Church were being cast to the winds; when criticism was running rife with the mad impulse which always accompanies a new movement of radicalism; and when evolution was intoxicating men with the novelty of its claims.

The historical questions of religion, such as were brought forward by Strauss's "Leben Jesu," and his work on John's Gospel, referred to in line 196 of "A Death in the Desert,"

seem never to have troubled our poet; but, on the other hand, the difficulty of getting a clear conception of the essential Christ caused him much unrest. Quite early in the century there had been a swing toward humanitarianism. The old Calvinism, with its hard doctrines, was gradually giving way before a more sympathetic ideal. In 1831, two years before Browning's first poem was published, Campbell, a Scotch minister, was expelled from the Scottish Church for preaching an unlimited atonement. In his preaching he brought out more clearly than it had before been seen that Christ's suffering was not alone vicarious, but was effective in that it perfected his own inward character and became a perfect revelation of the character of God. Maurice went very far in denying all penal satisfaction in the suffering of Christ, and also denying the thought of eternal punishment. To him the expression "eternal punishment" meant simply a condition and not duration of time. This of course carried out his idea of the atonement.

How much Browning knew of these movements we cannot say, but so far as he has ex-

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pressed himself his attitude was much in harmony with them. He, at least, agreed with those who discarded the doctrine of eternal punishment. To him there could have been nothing more awful than the thought that God would punish a man to satisfy his own anger. Rather all punishment was meant for the correction of faults, and when that had been accomplished there was no use of further penalty. "A Camel Driver" is a clear presentation of his theme, where we are told that overpunished wrong grows right in its turning upon the avenger. No better proof could be found that Browning believed in the eternal possibility of growth toward God than is given in the final word of the Pope regarding Guido's sentence and death. When, said he, this sentence of mine comes to him, suddenly lighting up the future like a flash upon the midnight seas, he may repent:

Else I avert my face, nor follow him
Into that sad obscure sequestered state
Where God unmakes but to remake the soul
He else made first in vain; which must not be.¹

¹"The Pope," VII. 228.

The theory of the fall of man and its attendant thought of original sin combined to make necessary the current conception of the atonement. Of these theories Browning made nothing. There are a few passages in "The Ring and the Book" which speak conventionally of the fall of Adam; and in some other poems we find like references, but they are probably only phrases caught up from current thought. The fact that he was a thoroughgoing evolutionist is sufficient proof that he did not believe in the literal fall of man as such, hence he would find no place for an atonement as held by his contemporaries. Little is made of the suffering on the cross save as it reveals Christ's love for and sympathy with man. It is true he speaks of the shame and pain of the cross, and of Christ's

Dying the death whose signs remain
Up yonder on the accursed tree,²

and from time to time the Pope speaks in a conventional way of the cardinal doctrines of the Catholic Church; but one would hardly be

²"Christmas Eve," IV. 304.

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able to find passages which could be called orthodox regarding the doctrines of atonement and vicarious suffering, and most if not all the passages which refer to these are without poetic fire or sympathetic statement. We do not know that our poet necessarily disbelieved these things, for they were matters of indifference to him. They were nonessential to his Christian life. Probably it would be a better statement of the truth if we should say that he disbelieved many of these things but did not stop to give expression to his unbelief.

But he would never remain negative. He must find an essential ground of Christian life before he could rest. Here again we find him reaching the same conclusion with Maurice in his theology. Each came to the thought of the Incarnation as the only true revelation of a loving God, the one in his rebound from Calvinism, and the other in his drawing away from cold Intelligence and Power.

Having, then, cleared the ground of some of these misconceptions as they appeared to Browning, it will be of interest to build up from his poetry that conception of Christ which

did satisfy his soul. There are two distinct points of view from which he approaches this study. One is the point of view of the non-believer and heathen; the other, that of the Christian. The first is found in such poems as "The Sun," "An Epistle," and "Cleon"; the second is mainly set forth in "Saul," "A Death in the Desert," and the double poem of "Christmas Eve and Easter Day."

Karshish, the Arab physician, approaches the question with great doubt and little reverence. He had always lived under an idea of a divine Power, but that power was cold, hard, arbitrary, far away in the distance and only dimly to be known. Nevertheless, it was a Power which had commanded his respect and fear; but the thought of a loving God had never found him. He meets one day with Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Of course he does not believe that Lazarus was really dead, or that Christ was really God; but he cannot rid himself of thoughts concerning him. What if this man who raised Lazarus should be divine, then God has taken on flesh and come to earth to minister to man. How

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very strange and incredible; but if it were only possible, how very beautiful! This he thinks would add love to the heretofore cold attributes of his God. Time after time he casts the thought aside, as it were, to pursue his scientific discussion; but each time this new conception draws him back with irresistible power, till at last he closes his letter with the conclusion that God would be all-loving if this hypothesis were true. These last words are not cold argument, for they burst forth into a passionate expression of faith transcending all intellectual difficulties:

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too—
So, through the thunder comes a human voice
Saying, "O heart I made, a heart beats here!
Face, my hands fashioned; see it in myself!
Thou hast no power nor mayst conceive of mine,
But love I gave thee, with myself to love,
And thou must love me who have died for thee!"*

The conclusion of Cleon, the Greek poet, artist, philosopher, is just the reverse of this glad, hopeful faith. He, too, needs the living revelation of God. His soul is not satisfied

*"An Epistle," V. 19, 20.

with what it has, but longs for an incarnation. We cannot help thinking that this desire may have been quickened by what he has heard of Christ, but which he cannot believe. However this may be, a cold Zeus does not satisfy him.

Long since, I imaged, wrote the fiction out,
That he or other gods descended here
And, once for all, showed simultaneously
What, in its nature, never can be shown,
Piecemeal or in succession.⁴

But because he is not sure of this revelation, because it is a fiction, he becomes a pessimist. Life is not worth living, for without such a manifestation of God, giving a more perfect knowledge and a hope for the future, most progress is most failure. This revelation is just what Browning felt he must find in Christ, and he found it. He had descended from God and was God. He had come to man and was Man. He was a perfect revelation of this life, which could not be presented piecemeal or by verbal revelation. There must be a descended God, who, whatever his limitations, was nevertheless a God.

⁴"Cleon," V. 84.

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Call Christ, then, the illimitable God,
Or lost.⁵

There is yet another pagan poem that bears on this subject. The most elaborate argument found in any of these poems for the Christ Man is in "The Sun." Ferishtah, the teacher, talks with a disciple who reports to him that one has blasphemously said:

God once assumed on earth a human shape.⁶

The Dervish replies that man is so constituted that he must give praise. His gratitude must go to something outside of himself. Let us suppose, he contends, that the ancients were right in thinking the sun was God. Everything which we enjoy on earth springs from the sun, and therefore we love and praise it. We eat a fig; we are pleased and give thanks to the gardener, but our gratitude does not stop here.

Step by step,

I mount by just progression slow and sure
To some prime giver—here assumed yon orb—
Who takes my worship.⁷

⁵"A Death in the Desert," V. 204.

⁶"The Sun," XII. 15. ⁷*Ibid.*, XII. 16.

When he arrives at this, the sun is no longer a ball of fire. It is no longer a mass of dead matter, for that does not call for praise or love.

Whom have I in mind,
Thus worshiping, unless a man, my like
Howe'er above me? Man, I say—how else,
I being man who worship?⁸

Then the Dervish goes on to explain that every expression of love on man's part is a failure unless there is a loving God. But in order that God may love us he must understand us, which can only be when he becomes partly human. Only kindred soul can move a man's soul. This limits God in a sense; but the Dervish is willing to have that if only he can arrive at the Incarnation. He closes by saying that if any man can convince himself that such an incarnation has taken place, then he himself stands appalled at that conception which he needs but has not yet reached. On the whole the arguments of the pagan poems are unsatisfactory. They only show a positive need and demand for a God in human form. This can give rise to a conception of the truth, but cannot estab-

⁸"The Sun," XII. 16.

lish it as a fact. However, we feel that even in the minds of these pagans it is something which points them to a higher life, and brings them in closer touch with Divinity.

In the second class of poems which treat of the Incarnation the Christian characters approach the truth in very much the same manner as the pagans. However, they are not shut up simply to need as a basis of belief; they have a more vital contact. They look at it as a matter of living experience, and out of the richness of that experience they bring forth their arguments. It is not a question of demonstrable knowledge alone; but rather it is a question of life, of soul impressions. To them the historical Christ is certain; the essential Christ is much more important. The historical Christ is a subject for intellectual belief, but

the real God-function
Is to furnish a motive and injunction
For practicing what we know already.*

Such a motive can be furnished alone by the essential Christ. It makes little difference how

*“Christmas Eve,” IV. 318.

crude may be our ideas, or what mode of worship we employ, so long as we are vitalized by the Christ Spirit. The real command is not to believe in justice, truth, or any abstract principle, but,

Believe in me,
Who lived and died, yet essentially
Am Lord of Life. Whoever can take
The same to his heart and for mere love's sake
Conceive of the love,—that man obtains
A new truth; no conviction gains
Of an old one only, made intense
By a fresh appeal to his faded sense.¹⁰

Even the Professor in "Christmas Eve" with his fine arguments cannot get away from this need of a Christ. He still loves and worships the myth, and tells his pupils to do so. Christ remains in the lecture room as the Professor lectures, showing there must be some truth there. But the speaker feels that when trouble and death come this Professor must have something more substantial than a myth:

May Christ do for him what no mere man shall,
And stand confessed as the God of salvation!¹¹

The question of an historic Christ is taken

¹⁰"Christmas Eve," IV. 318. ¹¹*Ibid.*, IV. 327.

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up in "Easter Day," and also in "A Death in the Desert," but it is quite significant that no argument based upon historic facts is set forth. In each case the poet finds a more essential truth. Let us leave this truth, to look for a moment at the anthropomorphic view presented in Saul. The great king being despondent, David comes to solace him with music from his lyre. As he plays he also sings: first, the songs which are filled with the beauty of true life; then, the help tunes speaking of life's epochs; then, songs of aspiration; lastly, he sings of the king's future glory. At this the king really arouses, and bending back the head of the singer, gazes long and tenderly into his face. It is only then that the real truth for the consolation of Saul comes to David. He no longer sings. The love which he feels for the king is too great for music. He tells of a vision which makes a new law and a new life. The vision is this: If he loves Saul so much that he would give his life for him, would not God do even more? Can he lay claim to doing more for the creature than the Creator himself? Surely not. Then as the failure to un-

derstand this love of God comes surging over him, he reaches out for a revelation of that love. It must be a human manifestation. He cannot understand anything else. The passage quoted before, should be given here also:

'Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry for! my
flesh, that I seek
In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it
shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like
to me,
Thou shalt love and be loved by, forever: a Hand like
this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See
the Christ stand!¹²

There is also the question as to whether this Christ whom our needs demand is, after all, filling that need. The question is only suggested here, but its answer is plain. He certainly is sufficient, and is filling with power each human life which accepts him. This also is the real center of thought in "A Death in the Desert." Men following John will ask if John really was and did know. The answer to this is not to be found in the facts of history. It

¹²"Saul," IV. 85.

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is not even to be found in an ideal Christ fashioned according to our needs. It is found alone in experience. This experience John has had, and many of his disciples also. The only way to prove Christ is to live in him; to have his conscious presence with us. This is the ever new, ever vital proof that Christ is, when he transforms our lives by his power. Christ alone is able to

Snatch Saul the mistake,
Saul the failure, the ruin he seems now,—and bid him
awake
From the dream, the probation, the prelude, to find
himself set
Clear and safe in new light and new life,—a new har-
mony yet
To be run, and continued, and ended. . . .¹⁸

The same thing is said in "Easter Day," though the conclusion is not quite so clearly set forth. Here the Christian and non-Christian in conversation have a greatly differing ideal. To believe in the historical Christ is not hard for the Christian man. He accepts that without doubt. What more could he want, says the non-Christian. Believing there is only one

¹⁸"Saul," IV. 83.

thing to do, and that is to follow. But there is a deeper thought in the heart of the other. It is hard for him to be a Christian because it is hard for him to incorporate the Christ life into his own. Until he can do this—which he can never do perfectly—the proof of Christ as an adequate Saviour is not complete. He believes in it, he is growing toward its completion, and so all men must grow, through doubt to that which approximates truth.

We may be somewhat surprised to find that Browning, whom we are accustomed to think of only as philosopher, has made experience the final test of the validity and power of the Christ life. But such seems to be the case, for in his later poems he almost discarded the knowledge which is acquired by processes of reasoning, and thus was forced back upon the inner life, the experience of his soul. The result of such a knowledge of Christ and his power is often set forth. The Christ, who by his incarnation is able to throw open the gates of new life to us, becomes the Christ of regenerate life. When this life opens up to the human soul, all nature takes a different coloring. It is again the old

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story of the New Testament, with the angelic choir singing,

Glory to God in the highest :
On earth peace and good will among men.

Browning gives the thought beautiful expression :

And the stars of night beat with emotion, and tingled
and shot
Out in fire the strong pain of pent knowledge.¹⁴

When this experience came to David it brought
a new meaning into all nature :

In the gathered intensity brought to the gray of the
hills;
In the shuddering forests' held breath; in the sudden
wind-thrills;
In the startled wild beasts that bore off, each with eye
sidling still
Though averted with wonder and dread; in the birds
stiff and chill
That rose heavily, as I approached them, made stupid
with awe:
E'en the serpent that slid away silent,—he felt the new
law.¹⁵

Thus we see that Christian and pagan alike
felt the absolute necessity for the Incarna-

¹⁴"Saul," IV. 86. ¹⁵*Ibid.*, IV. 86.

tion.¹⁶ Life without it was not complete. Man was so created by God. Some of the ancients in their desire for this visible manifestation deified the sun; others saw God in certain animals, but all of these were unsatisfactory. These after all gave no real knowledge of God. They did not bring man in touch with him. A kindred soul was necessary to draw out the highest and most perfect worship. An insentient object would not serve, nor would an animal without sympathy. He must be a soul that throbs with sympathy for our own; suffers, hopes, loves, just as we do; and this could

¹⁶It may be noted here that the idea of an incarnation is foreign to the philosophy both of Buddhism and Mohammedanism. Browning must have been familiar with this fact, but this would only heighten the force of the argument coming from these pagan characters. Nor is this merely a fancy of the poets. I have been assured by Dr. Zwemer, that most scholarly missionary to the Mohammedan world, that a desire for an incarnation is in the heart of the most devout followers of the prophet. It is worth mention also that Professor C. P. Teile, in his Gifford Lectures on the "Elements of the Science of Religion" (Vol. II., Chap. V.), claims that this desire is universal, and is the supreme expression of man's need for communion with God.

only come through such a manifestation as Christ. Even before Christ came, and in the centuries yet to come, Browning saw that man must ever cry out for the human in the Divine.

In the preceding chapter we quoted Browning's words to Mrs. Orr in which he said that the evidences of divine power were all about us. But divine love could only be made clear by a Christ who became human. We also quoted the last words of the Epilogue to "Dramatis Personæ," after which he said to Mrs. Orr that the face spoken of was the face of Christ, and it was a personal Christ to him.

~ If our poet did not believe in the atonement as it was usually accepted, he did believe in it as a reconciliation of man to God. Christ became the reconciler of man to God in that he became the incarnate expression of God's love.

Himself conceived of life as love,
Conceived of love as what must enter in,
Fill up, make one with his each soul he loved.¹⁷

It was not necessary for God to be drawn back to man, but the reverse was true. Before

¹⁷"A Death in the Desert," V. 203.

man could be made one with God, he must be shown his sin; else, how could his sin be forgiven? This sin could be shown only by a Christ who died because of hatred of sin, and love for the men who lived in it. In as far as a man can show us our sin and reveal God's love and power to us through his own Christian life, just so far he becomes a human reconciler, a reincarnation, a new atonement. This is most beautifully expressed in the third part of the Epilogue to "*Dramatis Personæ*," to which we have just referred. Each individual is the center of the flow of life just as the rock in the great ocean. The human and divine power surging round him makes him a real center of being. At some time he is for a moment a world force. In "*Fifine at the Fair*" we are told that each grain of sand on the beach finds some moment when the whole of creation is reflected in its being. This moment is the moment of a man's most exalted life. Growth into this highest forms the greatest theme of Browning's poetry. It is the individual soul and its struggle that holds his attention. This growth must come by way of the garden of

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sorrow, the Golgotha of soul-stirring experience, the cross of an unselfish sacrifice in suffering, and through the greatest service to others. Out of this rending of his soul there shall grow a more perfect reincarnation, and his life shall be drawn up to Infinity. In all, Browning recognized that man must be led by the love of the Christ.

In such souls as Pompilia's, all these agencies have done their work. Her life, though filled with unhappiness and struggle, is finally love-crowned, and she passes away, the truest flower which earth holds up to the softened gaze of God! She was indeed a human manifestation of the Christ-life. Yes, she was more. She was a human atonement lifting the soul of Pope and priest to higher levels. In like manner Caponsacchi breaks the bonds of conventional Christianity and rises to a vital life, the soldier-saint. He becomes the medium through which others see God, and as such is a living atonement. No priest or prophet ever received a truer testimony of this than that bestowed on him by Pompilia:

Through such souls alone
God stooping shows sufficient of his light
For us i' the dark to rise by. And I rise.¹⁸

Christ's purpose in coming into the world was not alone to show men God's love, but also to show them simultaneously, and not by piecemeal, what they might become. By this Incarnation he reveals

The worth both absolute and relative
Of all his children from the birth of time,
His instruments for all appointed work.¹⁹

By growing into the spirit of Christ's life, we become new incarnations; by doing the work which God appoints, we become his children; by showing the world his love, we become his new atoning agents drawing all men to him. But the incarnate Christ was to Browning much more than a simple example of a perfect life. He was a divine being, entering into and making divine all those who sought his companionship, desired his power, and accepted his will. When this love of Christ was found in the life of a man, it was

¹⁸"Pompilia," VII. 57. ¹⁹"Cleon," V. 84.

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but natural that he should become the minister of the things of Christ.

If Christ, as thou affirmest, be of men
Mere man, the first and best but nothing more,—
Account him, for reward of what he was,
Now, and forever, wretchedest of all.
For see; himself conceived of life as love,
Conceived of love as what must enter in,
Fill up, make one with his each soul be loved:
Thus much for man's joy, all men's joy for him.
Well, he is gone, thou sayest, to fit reward.
But by this time are many souls set free,
And very many still retained alive:
Nay, should his coming be delayed a while,
Say, ten years longer (twelve years, some compute),
See if, for every finger of thy hands,
There be not found, that day the world shall end,
Hundreds of souls, each holding by Christ's word
That he will grow incorporate with all,
With me as Pamphylax, with him as John,
Groom for each bride! Can a mere man do this?
Yet Christ saith, this he lived and died to do.
Call Christ, then, the illimitable God,
Or lost!²⁰

Such was the message of Browning concerning the world's greatest personality. It came at a time when men were crying out for help. Strauss had written his "Leben Jesu," and

²⁰"A Death in the Desert," V. 203, 204.

Renan had published his work on the Life of Jesus. Other writers, such as Voltaire and Rousseau, had shaken the faith of the age. There was need of a strong, vital message of belief. This Browning supplied, and that, too, in such form that it commanded the respect and assent of the most careful scholars. He went beyond the mere historical research of Strauss, and showed that Christian faith was valid because it was able to explain the deep realities of life.

To Browning the world owes a great debt for bringing such a positive and convincing message in this period of deep unrest. He met this age of doubt by reminding men that doubt was but a mask of faith, and the greatest proof that Christ really was lay in the fact that through doubt men were groping for a knowledge of him. He helped men to see that the essential argument for Christ was not historical, but based upon the fact that Christ, and Christ alone, was able to solve the problems of life and satisfy the longings of the soul.

CHAPTER III.

THE PRINCIPLE OF DUALITY.

WE shall have occasion later to call attention to Browning's emphasis on the sharp contrasts of life. It is by virtue of contrast alone that we are conscious beings, and this law extends into every field of human thought and action.

On this basis men have from time immemorial looked at good and evil, and then looked behind this good and evil to their supposed creators—God and the devil. Primitive men such as Caliban saw certain forces about them which made for happiness and peace, such forces as the sky, the sun, and the stars. But Caliban saw also and worshiped—if slavish fear can be called worship—the powers of the storm, of the earthquake, of night, and of death. These to him were the real gods whom he was bound to please if he might, and whom, please or not, he must always fear. Such a power was in the mind of Caliban when he

talked of Setebos, who did just as he pleased save for the power of Quiet.

In some such way as Browning works out for us in this poem, men came to believe in a dual set of rulers in the universe—gods and devils. As civilization advanced, the thought that every object was possessed of an independent spirit, good or evil, began to change, and it became a common notion that over these good and evil spirits there ruled two supreme beings, a God and a devil. To the former was attributed all good and pleasure which came into the life of man, and to the latter was attributed all sorrow and pain. This idea grew with the ages, and finally found its way into the Hebrew literature and the Bible. Incorporated into the creed of the Christian Church, it grew ever stronger through the Middle Ages, and not until the prevalence of the idea of evolution was there any other well-formed and widely accepted theory of the origin of evil than that it was the work of the devil. At the time when Browning began to write, however, there was a radical change coming over religious thought. Men were be-

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ginning to see that the paradox of good in apparent evil really had a plain truth in it, and certainly many things that had once seemed evil were by a deeper knowledge proved good for man. This at once set men to questioning if there was a real author of evil, as such, and if so the old question of the ages was to be faced. How could he coexist with an all-powerful, all-loving, all-wise God? To this question Browning early addressed himself. Let us see if we can find the truth of his thought about a personal devil by looking at some of his passages.

We propose to divide the passages which contain references to the devil into three classes in accordance with the principles of interpretation laid down in the Introduction. First, those spoken by Browning himself in non-dramatic poems; second, those spoken by dramatic persons and put with some degree of sympathy; and, third, those which seem to be used in an entirely conventional manner without thought either of belief or of disbelief in the devil.

We have given in the Introduction the list

of poems which are considered autobiographical. In all of these poems there are only a few references to the devil.

It is not quite certain whether "Easter Day" is a personal poem or not, but by many it is so considered, and therefore we give a reference from it. As the doubting Christian closes his narration of the vision which came to him three years before, he again repeats the opening thought of the poem, that to be a Christian is very hard; but of this he is glad. He would not live in a world and enjoy a religion which made all life ghastly smooth, but rather would he be thwarted as a man and struggle against the evil tempter.

Thank God, she still each method tries
To catch me, who may yet escape,
She knows,—the fiend in angel's shape!¹

The fiend here may be the environment of earth, with its alluring evil and crying wrong, but it is barely possible to read behind that environment a personal force for evil.

The first book of "The Ring and the Book"

¹"Easter Day," IV. 360.

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is Browning's own words, given as an explanation of what follows. In this Guido and his accomplices are spoken of as devils.² Conventional reference is also made to "the world, the flesh, and the devil."³ A little later Guido is aided in his foul deeds,

By hands unguessed before, invisible help
From a dark brotherhood.⁴

The parents of Pompilia are cheated of their child by the Prince o' the Power of the Air;⁵ and finally cowardly wrongdoers are compared to Satan.⁶

The twelfth book of "The Ring and the Book" is also personal, or at least semi-personal. In this there are four passages where the word devil is used,⁷ but they throw no light on our discussion.

"Christmas Eve" is also a personal poem in which occur two references to the devil. The first of these somewhat flippantly refers to the chapel congregation listening

²"The Ring and the Book," VI. 13. ³*Ibid.*, VI. 15.

⁴*Ibid.*, VI. 18. ⁵*Ibid.*, VI. 18, 19. ⁶*Ibid.*, VI. 30.

⁷"The Book and the Ring," VII. 310, 316, 319, 320.

With such content in every snuffle,
As the devil inside us loves to ruffle.*

The second one is purely hypothetical, and cannot be taken as evidence of belief in a personal devil.⁹ "La Saisiaz" contains two strong references in which a personal devil is set forth. The presence of evil in the world forces one to ask why God has allowed the beauty of the universe to be marred by the infecting breath of the serpent.¹⁰ The more the poet looked about him, the more strongly did this question press for an answer. Must there be clouds in order that we may enjoy the shine; and must there be anguish to teach us sympathy? The deliberate conclusion of the poet is that this life is simply a pupil's place; if such is not true, then this world is devil-born.

If the harsh throes of the prelude die not off into
the swell
Of that perfect piece they sting me to become a-
strain for,—

Plainlier! if this life's conception new life fail to
realize,

⁹"Christmas Eve," IV. 291. ¹⁰*Ibid.*, IV. 317.

¹⁰"La Saisiaz," XI. 89.

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then all is but

One huge
Reflex of the devil's doings—God's work by no subter-
fuge.¹¹

This is probably the strongest of all the references to a personal devil, and may be taken as a climax of the non-dramatic utterances, the list of which is, I believe, complete.

The references to the devil, put into the mouths of dramatic persons, are so very numerous that mention of them all would be impossible. The hero in "Pauline" speaks of God having vanished from the universe and some dark spirit sitting in his seat.¹² Paracelsus denominates the devil "a tempter of men," and Pippa, the innocent weaving girl, declares:

. . . Not the worst of people's doings scare
The devil.¹³

In an exquisite poem, which glows with truth, the devil maliciously destroys the bliss of two lives. It is in bitter tones the woman cries she is satisfied

¹¹"La Saisiaz," XI. 89, 90. ¹²"Pauline," I. 16.

¹³"Pippa Passes," I. 234.

Now that I know if God or Satan be
Prince of the Power of the Air.¹⁴

The noblest of all Browning's characters, the Pope, who is a good Catholic, speaks often of the devil. He portrays him as the "arch tempter, whom all must fight"; the ruler of the hosts of evil, of which bad men form a part; the plucking fiend who would have destroyed the purity of Pompilia's soul, and the one whom Christ alone can slay.

Half-Rome thinks the marriage of Guido and Pompilia was carried out because of "the devil's will to work his worst for once." Other Half-Rome calls Lucifer "the son of night," and later, "a lord who pays his liegemen brass for gold." *Tertium Quid* makes him the author of trouble, mischief and evil for the

Climax and crown of things
Invariably is, the devil appears himself,
Armed and accoutered, horns and hoofs and tail!¹⁵

Guido, being born and reared a Catholic, of course believed in a devil, but it seems not to have affected him very seriously as to his con-

¹⁴"Inn Album," X. 183. ¹⁵"*Tertium Quid*," VI. 184.

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duct; and Pompilia, the fairest flower of earth, a soul so pure it would not take pollution, looked to a God above with love, and shunned a fiend below with fear and trembling. The noble woman in "Inn Album," whose life is a tragedy that strikes sorrow to the coldest heart, speaks with an earnestness begotten of conviction, when she calls the devil the "Prince of the Power of the Air," and declares that he had a part in the ruining of her life.¹⁶

The references which are merely conventional may be counted almost by hundreds. The devil is the one to swear by, the one to swear at, and, on the whole, one of the most convenient hackneys that a literary man ever had; and Browning did not hesitate to use him freely. Besides these three classes of references, there are a few that use the conventional name devil, but really mean the evil tendency of man, as our theologians would say. Paracelsus, whose own spirit has become his accuser and persecutor, says to Festus,

If you knew how a devil sneers within me!¹⁷

¹⁶"Inn Album," X. 183. ¹⁷"Paracelsus," I. 134.

It is this same kind of tempting fiend which comes to Leonce Miranda and urges him to lose his troubled memories in the Seine. An evil spirit was behind the villain in "Inn Album" pushing him on to his vile deeds. When Pompilia calls, the priest Caponsacchi throws aside his robes, flings away his indolent lack of manhood, and springs forth a soldier-saint; but the Pope, while praising him, says there was

Power in the air for evil as for good,
Promptings from heaven and hell.¹⁸

As they escape with the truest purity of soul, an "unseen assembly" watches the journey. In many such passages as these the prick of evil conscience, the evil motive, when turned toward the destruction of man's entire self, are personified as a personal devil. When we stand over a precipice and look down to the rocks beneath, where our bodies would be dashed to pieces if we should throw ourselves over, the temptation is sometimes very strong to commit the deed. It is this impulse, this

¹⁸"The Pope," VII. 183.

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initial of action which leads to harm, that is often personified as the devil.

What, then, shall we say in regard to all these passages? Do they represent Browning's own belief? and if not, how shall we explain them? The conventional references need not be much discussed. The belief in a personal devil was so very common, and we might say universal then, that the easiest possible way of getting a conception of evil into the minds of men was to put in a reference to the devil. Then also it was a good word to use because it carried along with it the weight of tradition and saved explanation. It would be very natural, therefore, for any writer to put in such references regardless of his belief in the subject. The passages which are put in the mouths of Catholics—no small number—must of course, by the very laws of dramatic art, accept and uphold the idea of a personal devil.

The dramatic passages we may explain in two ways—either the speakers were forced to speak respectfully of the devil because of their official position, or else these speakers are using the term in an entirely conventional way. If

one will go very carefully over all the dramatic references he will probably not be able to find one that thoroughly convinces him that Browning was speaking seriously for himself in it.

There is not that glow of poetry, not that expression of feeling, which is necessary to bring conviction. One cannot help feeling that these expressions were never intended to carry conviction of truth with them.

As to the quotations from autobiographical poems, we find more difficulty of explanation. However, if we will examine each of these we will find that the thought is rather that of evil personified than of any real person. The fiend in angel shape found in "Easter Day" was probably the man's own passions over which he found much trouble in keeping a hand of control, or it might have been environment as suggested before, or—what is barely possible—it might be personal.

The dark brotherhood in "The Ring and the Book" seems to come as a familiar expression, and certainly conveys nothing more to the mind than the thought of circumstances which aided the evil deed. The reference found in

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"La Saisiaz," which we have said is probably the strongest in all Browning's poetry, is conditioned on the fact that there be no future life. This life without the hope of the future, where wrong shall be righted and struggle show forth in development, would be a terrible example of misguided and maladjusted creation. Such a creation could not come from a God such as Browning conceived, but must come from an evil god or a devil. It means simply this: If there is no future where the real purpose of evil will be revealed, then all life is evil and absolutely so. There is no God, and our human aspirations are false prophets which add to our sorrows by making tenders which they never pay. But, after all, Browning does not accept the condition. He does believe in a future existence, and therefore the passage does not of necessity mean that he believed in a devil.

The other reference in "La Saisiaz" asks whether God was lacking in power or in love when he allowed the serpent to shrivel life's garlands with his breath. The answer is: If this life is a training place for larger things,

then God may have a wise purpose in all evil and may have created it himself to fulfill this purpose.

Finally, we may say that the passages where the expression is used do not usually glow with the fervor of real belief, and where such passages are really poetic the poetry will usually be marred if we take the word devil to mean a real monster. It is the fact of evil tendency, and its being turned; the fact of evil passion, and its being controlled; the fact of evil intention, and its being thwarted, that lends the halo to the poetry. Take this thought away and put in the thought of a person who rules and controls, and our poetry is spoiled. Now if real poetry,—and by poetry we mean that verse which glows with passion,—if real poetry is the expression of the truth of a writer's soul, we are forced to say that that interpretation which gives to it the greater fervor is more nearly the truth than any other. Taking this as a basis of the interpretation of Browning's poetry, we do not think that any belief of the poet in a personal devil can be found there.

But if we had only these references to judge

from, there might still be grounds for holding that Browning believed in a personal devil. Let us view the thought in connection with his other tenets of faith—if such we may call them. In our chapter on God we have shown that Browning believed in a God who was all-powerful, all-wise, and all-loving. This being the case, it is improbable that a man of his bent of mind should hold also to a personal devil. The doctrine of eternal punishment has always gone along with the doctrine of a personal devil. Browning dropped the former, and the latter must go also. It would be inconsistent with the nature of the devil to punish a man in order to reform him, and when he had been reformed to send him out on his mission of eternal development; and yet this is what Browning claims that evil does. In fact, the whole purpose of evil as conceived by the poet is inconsistent with the nature of the devil. Evil is the sting to growth; it is the impetus to a higher life. If now the devil is the author of evil, he is the creator of that which elevates mankind. But the office of the devil is not to elevate, but to tear down and

destroy. Hence, our devil is thwarting the purpose of his own being and is become rather a god than an evil monster. Browning gets out of this difficulty by simply saying that God is the author of evil. On the other horn of the dilemma one might say that since God is the author of evil he is without love, and hence may be behind the devil in all his fiendish work. But Browning was as unwilling to accept that as he was to accept the other. His deliberate conclusion, then, was that we do not need—nay, what is more, we have no place for—a personal devil. God is responsible for both good and the possibilities of evil, and Browning thinks the results therefrom justify the means. Many would shrink from this thought, but Browning feared not to believe what to him seemed the truth; he dared say what he believed, and what he has said convinces us that he was by no means a dualist.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ORIGIN AND NATURE OF EVIL.

PROBABLY no question has claimed the attention of man so long, and caused so many bitter controversies, as that of the Origin and Nature of Evil. If we should go back in the history of humanity to the earliest awakening of moral consciousness, we should probably find some theory, more or less crude, in regard to this question, following close upon that awakening. One of the earliest facts that came to man was the fact of pain in the world; that he was in the midst of an environment with whose powers and working he was out of harmony. Naturally his first question would be, Who created him and nature thus at variance? The shock of this first awakening is most graphically given in the story of the fall of man; and this narrative has been the rallying point around which arguments have raged for centuries.

Man has asked many times not only, Whence

came this evil? but, What is its nature? And both questions are legitimate. All classes of men in all ages have formed their theories in regard to this subject; but no other class of men have given such striking utterance to those theories as have the great poets. Job, wrestling with the evil of life, in the dark valley of pain where no comforter could be found, cried out in his anguish:

Why is life given to a man whose way is hid,
And whom God hath hedged in?¹

Dante gave the best years of his life to a poem that involved the whole sweep of the question of evil and its overcoming:

I found me in a gloomy wood, astray,
Gone from the path direct.²

Milton's greatest song was

Of man's first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden till one greater man
Restore us, and regain the blessed seat.³

¹Job iii. 23. ²Dante's "Hell," lines 2, 3.

³"Paradise Lost," Book I., II. 1-5.

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Tennyson wrote the greatest poem of his life with this as a keynote:

Oh, yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill,
To pangs of nature, sins of will,
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood.*

On no other question has Browning spent so much thought, and to his poetry the world is indebted for many helpful ideas looking to its solution.

What, then, is the origin of evil? The Gnostics settled the question by saying that evil was inherent in matter. As God was good he could not create that which was essentially evil—matter. Matter was created by an emanation,—the last in a series evolved from God,—each successive emanation having less and less of the divine element. Since man could not entirely free himself from contact with matter, he was himself evil; even his body being a source of contamination. Thus Gnosticism limited God, and the system ended in Dualism, recognizing a principle of good and

*"In Memoriam," Sec. 54.

a principle of evil. Others have regarded evil as without a creator. To them it was simply a negative principle, and needed no efficient cause to bring it into existence. Still others, and among them the poet Tennyson, have regarded it as arising out of man's own sensuous nature, and hence a form of animalism. Finally, what seems terrible to many, the whole matter has been attributed to God as the only efficient Creator.

It may be well, before proceeding further, to outline the ordinary view of the origin and nature of evil held at the time of Browning. The account in Genesis tells us that God created the world perfect, with all its forces and counter-forces in truest harmony. There was no thought in the mind of the writer as to God's inability or lack of desire to create all things in a manner which to the writer seemed perfect—that is, without any evil whatever. On man was placed the responsibility of evil, for he yielded to the beguiling of the serpent. It was God who placed it within man's power to choose good or evil. God is also made responsible for natural evil, for he drove Adam

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and Eve from the garden with the curse that Adam should eat of the fruit of the ground in sorrow all the days of his life; and Eve should bring forth her children in sorrow. There is here no mention of a personal devil. God is responsible for the existence of natural evil. It was not until many centuries after this was written, or at least in a much later development of the Old Testament, that the conception of a devil, on whom the responsibility of evil could be placed, was brought forward. But this conception does find a place in the later books of the Old Testament. Strange to say, the Church has for many centuries transferred the attributes of the devil to this serpent in the garden, and thus plunged us into endless controversy. What is even stranger, Satan is supposed to have been the creator of evil. Evil is assumed to be a lack of perfection, and hence the world became imperfect through the introduction of this principle. This was the thought most prevalent in Browning's time.

In a book written quite recently by a believer in a personal devil, we have found this very significant sentence which sums up fairly well the

attitude of many of the religious thinkers of the first half of the nineteenth century: "In perfect goodness and perfect power and wisdom He made it all, but an enemy disturbed the nice adjustment of things."⁵ Browning was unable to conceive how an enemy could slip in and destroy the harmony of a universe sustained by an all-powerful and all-loving God...

We are now prepared to examine Browning's views of natural evil. As was shown in the preceding chapter, he did not believe in a personal devil, and hence that source of its origin was not valid for him. Without hesitation, then, he puts the whole responsibility on God. Ferishtah asks of one of his questioners,

Shall we receive good at the hand of God
And evil not receive?"

As the perfect being languished in galling serenity on the Star Rephan, it was God who put unrest in his heart and made him a fit personage for this world of evil and strife.

⁵"Evil and Evolution" (anonymous), p. 59.

"Ferishtah's Fancies," XII. 6.

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Prime Potency, did Thy hand unbar
The prison-gate of Rephan my Star?"

Even the orthodox old Pope speaks of pain as the creation of God, meant to evolve the moral qualities of man. This being settled, it was incumbent upon him to show that the nature of evil was such as was consistent with the goodness of God.

First of all, there are many natural evils which arise out of man's limitation of being. He is not perfect and has no perfection of vision. His knowledge is limited; he is in a state of progress, and progression denotes that he is imperfect and bound to evil. We cannot speak of man in a fixed state, but must ever think of him as in a state of progression, becoming more and more. But this is in itself a limitation, and his aspirations must constantly draw beyond himself.

God's gift was that man should conceive of truth
And yearn to gain it, catching at mistake,
As midway help till he reach the fact indeed.*

"Rephan," XII. 258.

*"A Death in the Desert," V. 201.

This ignorance works itself out into various forms of limitation. There are forces in the universe which ought to work toward the happiness and well-being of man; but in his shortsightedness he does not perceive his own relationship to them. These forces then become man's greatest enemy, destroying instead of blessing. Much of physical evil is a simple matter of maladjustment. When men are wiser, they will no longer build their houses on the sides of volcanic mountains where the lava may burst forth; or settle on low islands where a wave of the sea may sweep them from existence. Men need to learn the laws of nature and put themselves in harmony with them.

Then again, this lack of knowledge becomes a source of evil in that it keeps us from our highest attainment. It does more, it dooms us to partial failure. The strife which Paracelsus speaks of is a "blind and endless one." It is not one waged by a person with full wisdom and knowledge. His failure, in so far as he was a failure, was due to ignorance. Sordello speaks of

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Evil, the scheme by which, thro' Ignorance,
Good labors to exist.*

We can never do the greatest work until we learn to use the forces which God has given us for our assistance. When these forces are known and their laws are followed, then many of the present natural evils will be turned into blessings. This, it seems, is what is meant by the sublime expression of the musician:

The evil is null, is naught, is silence implying sound;
What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much
good more;

On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect round.¹⁰

Still again this ignorance is a source of evil, in that it blinds man to the real results of life. He looks at the present rather than the future. He fails to see that this evil is transient, that it passes away like a cloud. It may obscure the orb for a moment; but it is no orb itself, and hence must pass. God looks not at the present; he cares not for time; for, since he himself is eternal, only that which is eternal is vital to him.

••••• "Sordani," II. 179. ¹⁰"Abt Vogler," V. 173.

Yet since Earth's good proved good—
Incontrovertibly
Worth loving—I understood
How evil—did mind descry
Power's object to end pursued—
Were haply as cloud across
Good's orb, no orb itself:
Mere mind—were it found at loss
Did it play the tricky elf
And from life's gold purge the dross?¹¹

As Browning stands in the presence of Guercino's angel spreading her soft wings above the head of the child which she holds in keeping, he longs for a perfect rest which the angel of God alone can give. If only this angel would place her hands gently upon his head and smooth away the cares of life which distort his vision of God; if she would only sweep away the clouds which shut out a perfect knowledge of God; if by her agency his eyes might be made to see as God sees, then how different would life appear.

How soon all worldly wrong would be repaired!
I think how I should view the earth and skies
And sea, when once again my brow was bared
After thy healing, with such different eyes.

¹¹"Reverie," XII. 262.

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O world, as God has made it! All is beauty:
And knowing this, is love, and love is duty.

What further may be sought for or declared?¹²

If man could just lift the veil which hides the future; if from the mountain tops of the far-distant ages he could look on these evils of the present, how very different all would be! He could then see them in the light of their results, and not be prejudiced by their joy or sorrow. He could see them in relation to God, and recognize the fact that they were only transient and not lasting or eternal. The whole of life, with its joys and sorrows, would blend into one harmony and would lead upward to God.

Over the ball of it,
Peering and prying,
How I see all of it,
Life there, outlying!
Roughness and smoothness,
Shine and defilement,
Grace and uncouthness:
One reconciliation.

All's lend-and-borrow
Good, see, wants evil,

¹²"The Guardian-Angel," IV. 128.

Joy demands sorrow,
Angel weds devil!¹⁸

Taken, then, in the sweep of eternity, in comparison with everlasting principles, in relation to God's eternal purpose, natural evil is a transient quantity. Of course to the individual at the present it is a vital and real thing. It must be, else its purposes would be lost. Of this we will speak more definitely later on.

The problem of moral evil is somewhat more difficult. In biblical language it is the transgression of law. Law would probably mean, if rightly interpreted, the rules of conduct laid down in revelation and approved by conscience, or those rules dictated by conscience even if omitted in revelation. But moral law has often been made a more arbitrary thing by the Church. It has been made a matter of authority, and the transgression of that authorized code has been called sin, without regard to whether or not reason and conscience approved. Under such a system, sin had little reference to voluntariness of action. Done deliberately

¹⁸"Pisgah-Sights," IX. 203.

or not, in ignorance or in the light of full knowledge, if a deed crossed this authority it was called sin. The devil has been made responsible for most of the sin of the world, in that he constantly persuades men to take the wrong way rather than the right. A few people of Browning's time believed that the devil did more than persuade men; he forced them, so that "all their striving turned to sin." Besides, much was made of sin which came to man by imputation. By Adam all sinned, and a penalty was demanded and must be paid.

It will be readily understood that Browning did not accept many of these views. To the time-worn question, Why does God permit the devil to live? he gave a decided answer. In one of his latest poems, "Mihrab Shah," the question is seriously asked as to whether malignity defeats beneficence; or in other words, Did the devil create evil? But the thought is strongly and in all seriousness put aside. Who, then, is the author of sin? Man, and man alone. Not man in a generic sense, but in the individual sense. Of the fall of Adam, in its theological sense, the poet made nothing; but

he certainly believed in the possibility of a constant falling on the part of Adam's posterity. The immortality of the race was a matter of small concern to him compared with the immortality of the individual man. Man is a free moral agent upon whom is placed the responsibility of good and evil, and each man must decide for himself which he will choose.

God, whose pleasure brought
Man into being, stands away
As it were a handbreadth off, to give
Room for the newly-made to live,

And use his gifts of brain and heart,
Given, indeed, but to keep forever.¹⁴

The sin of Adam, then, is not imputed to the succeeding generations. The sins of the fathers can only be visited upon the children of the third and fourth generations by the simple law of heredity. It is true we do find in a few poems conventional expressions of the "flesh being eaten up with sin"; of the soul being "knit around as with a charm of sin"; of an "indulgence ripening the inborn germs of sin

¹⁴"Christmas Eve," IV. 295.

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to strength"; but these references do not show the real trend of the author's mind. Even the Pope, when he considers the selfishness and meanness of his priests, bursts forth with righteous indignation:

The fault, the obduracy to good,
Lies not with the impracticable stuff
Whence man is made, his very nature's fault.¹⁵

Man's nature is not made of cold, passionless ice which the moon cannot melt, nor is it made of stone which the sun cannot warm into bloom, with neither ice nor stone to blame;

But it can melt, that ice, can bloom, that stone.¹⁶

We are free, and the essence of sin consists in the very fact that we do choose that which is wrong. When we transgress law ignorantly we may bring down evil upon our heads, but it can never be charged to us as sin. A Camel-Driver says most emphatically that "ignorance which sins is safe." Sin, then, is not a transgression of an arbitrary code; it can hardly be said to be a specific act at all; it is rather the spirit of the action. To Browning

¹⁵"The Pope," VII. 210. ¹⁶*Ibid.*, VII. 210.

the dangerous thing was not the single deed, it was the spirit which dominated the life. That alone has the quality of sin or righteousness which proceeds from our vital being.

'Tis not what man Does which exalts him, but what man Would do!¹⁷

Goodness does not consist in abstaining from a certain number of proscribed things; its chief commandment is not, "Thou shalt not." It is rather a real growth, an active element, a positive quality, whose vital command is, "Thou shalt be." With all his might we find the poet fighting against the idea of a negative virtue.

Black—present, past, and future, interspersed
With blanks, no doubt, which simple folk style Good
Because not Evil.¹⁸

No life was considered an example of piety which merely abstained from doing certain things considered wrong. On the other hand, one of the greatest sins a man could commit was to lack decisive life. No sharper criticism of inactivity has been uttered than "The Statue and the Bust," which closes with these lines:

¹⁷"Saul," IV. 84. ¹⁸"A Bean-Stripe," XII. 46.

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And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost
Is—the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,
Though the end in sight was a vice, I say.¹⁰

To do the thing which is proscribed may be a sin, but to do a proper thing with an evil spirit is worse, and to be negative is worst of all. Browning commends the young Duchess who runs away from her custom-bound and conventionalizing husband, not because she thought the marriage vow was wanting in sacredness, but because it was better for her to flee and have life than to live with a man to whom her heart was not married and never could be. Many other such poems as this have brought down upon him the condemnation of the theological critics. He has been charged with having a surface idea of sin. "Sin as interpreted by Browning," says Wilson, "is not the kind of sin that the Bible proscribes, that the law of God legislates against." It seems evident, however, that even the casual reader of Browning would find him to be no easy-going temporizer. He is rather the apostle of a strenuous life. One has called him the

¹⁰"The Statue and the Bust," IV. 274.

"Poet militant, the Prophet of struggling manhood." He called for a positive life, for a fight against all sin, and he surely would not have done this had he thought it a delusion. Miss Scudder has said of him: "Sin is so intense a fact to Browning that it turns him dramatist and furnishes all his best motifs. His poetry is simply an arena where men fight wickedness within and without."

Those who think that he believes sin to be a delusion must have confused his thought of natural evil with his thought of this specific evil. He does say that natural evil will vanish. It is only a shadow. It arises out of limitations, and when man has advanced to perfection those limitations will be removed. He also hopes with a strong hope that men in the process of moral evolution will at last reach that stage of perfection where they will no longer choose that which is evil, and in this way sin itself will vanish. But both natural and moral evil are intense realities so long as they have any power over man. Whatever they may be in the future they are vital to men now, and men must fight against them. Just

here is the fact that makes evil unreal. It is the overcoming of it, the growth beyond and above it. Evil will never vanish so long as man has not put it beneath his feet. It does not help him to have no personal devil and by his own misconduct become the devil of his own destruction. It means nothing to him that evil is only a shadow so long as it darkens his life and keeps him from being his higher self. If Browning hoped that sin would some time vanish from the world, he recognized that the possibility of sin would always remain so long as man remained a free agent.

It has been further said of Browning that his easy-going conception of sin led him to condone it in life, and even at times to incite men to sin. One can hardly understand how a careful student of Browning could make such a statement. We are aware of the fact that the priest in "The Ring and the Book" is made to speak of Pompilia as

A soul made weak by its pathetic want
Of just the first apprenticeship to sin.²⁰

²⁰"The Book and the Ring," VII. 320.

A number of Browning's readers have quoted this as a proof that he upheld the necessity of sin in the growth of a soul, but the lines following the quotation explain that she was so innocent she knew not how to protect herself against ignoble souls. A sin would have awakened her to the necessity of this, but it would also have made her soul its own deadliest enemy.

The "Statue and the Bust" and "Fifine at the Fair" are often taken as proof poems to show that the poet encouraged men to sin. Such an interpretation, however, is entirely false. It does not catch the spirit of the poems in the least. They are simply a presentation of a half truth which could not be so forcibly treated otherwise. The whole theme of the first is one of activity, unconventionality, and of vital feelings, and has otherwise no reference to any question of sin whatever. That would have made an entirely different poem. "Fifine at the Fair" is simply a vent to the thought of being "frenetic to be free." It is not a justification of ballet dancing or of unclean living, but a setting forth of a character

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which had strength enough to do the unconventional. To be sure, it is only a half truth; but if we say that a man is not justified in presenting one side of a question without noticing the other, we condemn many of Christ's own parables.²¹

On the other hand, Browning spoke freely of the fact that virtue was the law of life; and he strongly believed that the virtuous life was the happiest:

Yet self-mistrusting, should man bear himself,
Most assured on what now concerns him most,—
The law of his own life, the path he prints,—
Which law is virtue and not vice, I say.²²

Sin was something hideous in itself, and terrible in its results. There could be no stronger proof of the hatefulness of sin to Browning than the two pictures of Guido and Pompilia which he has drawn for us. The one represents sin and its retribution, the other purity and its exaltation. That sin sometimes did awaken men from their indifference he held was true, but this thought must be left for another chapter.

²¹Cf. Matt. xiii. 44. ²²"The Pope," VII. 216.

If, then, sin is so hateful, and God knew that some men would choose it, why did he not make a world where no such choice could be possible? The answer to this can be found in a number of poems. Man is a moral being, and in order that he may be such, he must be allowed freedom to choose. If there is no choice, then there is no morality attached to the action. To have made a world where there was no choice, where all was good, would have lifted the whole creation out of the realm of moral life. We have the picture of such a world in "Rephan." Everything there is perfect. There can be no change, for any change would be for the worse. Man, or rather, beings, there, have no desire. They are not even moral beings, for there is no choice. They languish in dead contentment without growth or life. The same thing would be true if God should force all men to be what we would now call moral. If they were forced they would not be moral, even though the things done, the thoughts entertained, were ever so perfect in themselves. We can have no such thing as a forced morality.

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Who speaks of man, then, must not sever
Man's very elements from man,
Saying, "But all is God's"—whose plan
Was to create man and then leave him
Able, his own word saith, to grieve him,
But able to glorify him too,
As a mere machine could never do,
That prayed or praised, all unaware
Of its fitness for aught but praise and prayer,
Made perfect as a thing of course.²³

Again it may be asked, Why did not God make sin of such a nature that man would know it was bad and absolutely so, and hence would not choose it? The answer to this is practically the same as before. The Christian speaker in "Easter Day" says that faith, in order to be, must be mixed with doubt. Otherwise it is no longer faith, but knowledge. If a man knew absolutely that a certain action would bring a rich reward and another action would bring him much sorrow, he of course would choose the former. But it would not be moral.

'Tis well averred,
A scientific faith's absurd,—
Frustrates the very end 'twas meant
To serve.²⁴

²³"Christmas Eve," IV. 295. ²⁴"Easter Day," IV. 331.

Since a moral being is the highest of all conceivable things, it is necessary that man have a chance to choose. This is not so when a man knows absolutely the result of all action. The non-Christian man in "Easter Day" claims that the whole trouble is with belief:

--- Could I believe once thoroughly,
The rest were simple. What? Am I
An idiot, do you think,—a beast?
Prove to me, only that the least
Command of God is God's indeed,
And what injunction shall I need
To pay obedience? . . .
. . . cannot I compute,
Weigh loss and gain together, suit
My actions to the balance drawn?²⁵

We can readily see that this action would be a mere bargaining. Fancy, in the dialogue of "La Saisiaz," brings the same argument. Each moment spent here in life is just laying up so much gain or loss for the future life. To this, Reason answers that it is liberty of doing evil which alone gives good, grace.

²⁵"Easter Day," IV. 328, 329.

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Once lay down the law, with Nature's simple "Such
effects succeed
Causes such, and heaven or hell depends upon man's
earthly deed
Just as surely as depends the straight or else the
crooked line
On his making point meet point or with or else with-
out incline,"—
Thenceforth neither good nor evil does man, doing
what he must.²⁶

It is the constant struggle for the truth, the
constant fear lest one shall not do the best
and attain the highest, that lends moral qual-
ity to all man's action. It is the doubt that
gives us assurance that we are moral beings.

With me, faith means perpetual unbelief
Kept quiet like the snake 'neath Michael's foot
Who stands calm just because he feels it writhe.²⁷

Evil which is absolutely black gives no chance
for choice. No man will take that which is
absolutely hateful. It is the evil which may
have an attendant good that man is tempted
to take. In fact, it may be doubted whether
any man ever takes any course of action in

²⁶"La Saisiaz," XI. 99.

²⁷"Bishop Blougram's Apology," V. 69.

which he sees only evil. But precisely this deciding between that which is essentially good and that which is only momentarily good is the means which man has of growth. If he is robbed of this possibility of choice, then he is no longer a moral agent.


To have made evil, then, of such a nature that man would not and could not desire it, would have been the same as forcing man to be virtuous, which is a contradiction. We do not choose between things absolutely foreign to our nature, hence it was morally impossible for God to make sin of the nature implied.

One is aware of the fact that just at this point Browning's philosophy breaks down to a certain extent. If doubt is necessary to faith, and partial ignorance is necessary to choice and hence to moral life, then the perfect being whose development has brought him to full knowledge would be beyond both faith and moral qualities. This dilemma arose in the mind of the author from the fact that however we consider evil, we fail to gain a final solution. If it is a real entity, then it can never be entirely overcome, and hence good can

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never triumph. This would be death to optimism. If it be unreal, then there is no need to fight it, and hence all moral life ceases. Either alternative ends by destroying moral life. But we must choose to believe one alternative, or else say we cannot know. Browning says the latter. Knowledge cannot be exact. The intellect is no sure guide. So much the more is this so to Browning, since absolute knowledge, as we have just seen, would in itself destroy all faith and all moral action. We, however, have never been able to see how the poet can be supposed to discard knowledge absolutely. If we have not perfect knowledge, we, at least, have a knowledge which is ever becoming complete. Likewise an ideal life has never yet been realized, but it is ever realizing. Though the possibility of sin is never absent, evil is ever becoming less real. Man, though he never will have attained, is ever attaining. All is progression toward a perfect state, though it may never reach that perfection.

The origin and nature of natural evil, then, is that it is a matter of maladjustment; it arises out of ignorance and limitation, and hence will



some time vanish. Since these limitations are of the very essence of man's nature, they are given by God, and hence even that part of natural evil which arises therefrom is to be attributed to God. God is entirely responsible for the possibility of moral evil, for he has made man free. Man is responsible for the fact that sin has been actualized in the world. Sin is real and destructive, and must be fought and overcome. It will always remain a possibility, even if not finding expression in the deeds or thoughts of man.

CHAPTER V.

THE PURPOSE OF EVIL.

To every man there must be a supreme reality with respect to which he judges life. Without such a supreme reality, there can be no such thing as a philosophy of life. Hence the first essential to an understanding of that philosophy is to discover for ourselves what this principle is. In the first chapter we tried to set forth Browning's belief in God, as a God of love. All life is to be interpreted in the light of a spiritual principle, and that principle is love. It remains here to notice very briefly in what manner he presents this love as a solution of the problem of life. Love is the point of contact between God and man. It is the full perfection of God, the partial attainment of man. It makes no difference what else may happen to a man, he has gained all if he attains to love. In "Cristina" we are told that the whole purpose of life is to learn to love.

Ages past the soul existed,
Here an age 'tis resting merely,
And hence fleets again for ages,
While the true end, sole and single,
It stops here for is, this love-way,
With some other soul to mingle.¹

In a much more philosophic poem we have practically the same statement:

For life, with all it yields of joy and woe,
And hope and fear,—believe the aged friend,—
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,
How love might be, hath been, indeed, and is.²

So supreme is this principle of love that the possession of it by man would make him greater than God if God did not possess it.

For the loving worm, within its clod,
Were diviner than a loveless god
Amid his worlds, I will dare to say.³

Even all pain in the world is meant to develop this love, and as a man attains to a more perfect possession of it he is said to be God-like. This "dread machinery of sin and sorrow" is intended

¹"Cristina," IV. 26.

²"A Death in the Desert," V. 190.

³"Christmas Eve," IV. 295.

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To make him love in turn and be beloved,
Creative and self-sacrificing too,
And thus eventually God-like.⁴

Love is the eternal thing in the world which
man's neglect cannot lessen and the forces of
evil cannot destroy.

Be love less or more
In the heart of man, he keeps it shut
Or opes it wide, as he pleases, but
Love's sum remains what it was before.⁵

How, then, are we to reconcile this principle of eternal love with the existence of almost universal evil? If there is no purpose in the evil from which man suffers, or if this purpose could be accomplished by some other means, then love is not the spiritual principle by which all life may be interpreted, and God is not a God of love. If, however, Browning can show that God has a wise purpose in placing man in the midst of evil, and if this purpose cannot be otherwise fulfilled so far as our finite minds can see, then we must allow him to retain his conception of a loving Father in spite of the fact of sorrow, pain, and evil.

⁴"The Pope," VII. 205. ⁵"Christmas Eve," IV. 296.

This question was constantly before Browning, and throughout his poetry he was trying to solve it. He was sure that evil had a purpose in the world.

Let the sage
Concede a use to evil, though there starts
Full many a burgeon thence, to disengage
With thumb and finger lest it spoil the yield
Too much of good's main tribute!⁶

And again:

Suppose the Gardener of Man's ground
Plants, for a purpose, side by side with good,
Evil.⁷

Browning conceived the purpose of evil to be threefold: to teach knowledge of good by contrast; to arouse the feeling of sympathy; and to serve as a means of development. John Fiske has a most admirable essay on the "Mystery of Evil," in which he brings out quite clearly that all consciousness is the result of incessant change:

In every stream of human consciousness that we call a soul, each second of time witnesses thousands of infinitely small changes, in which one fleeting group of pulsations in the primordial mind-stuff gives way to

⁶"Bernard de Mandeville," XII. 83. ⁷*Ibid.*, XII. 82.

another and different but equally fleeting group. Each group is unlike its immediate predecessor. The absence of difference would be continuation, and continuation means stagnation, blankness, negation, death. That ceaseless flutter in which the quintessence of conscious life consists is kept up by the perpetual introduction of the relations of likeness and unlikeness.⁸

Just as consciousness is kept up by incessant change,—and change can come only by variety, or likeness and unlikeness,—so each particular state of consciousness must be superinduced by likeness and unlikeness in the superinducing agents. If there were no variety, there would be no consciousness. Thus we know cold because we have experienced heat; we know black because we have seen white; we are conscious of sound because we have known silence. If one lived in the midst of an incessant cannonade, there would be no consciousness of sound because there would be no contrast with silence. If one never had any color save black presented to him, he would have no conception of color, for there would be no contrast. This is the law of counter-relativity, or, as it is sometimes called, the law of contrast, on which

⁸"Through Nature to God," p. 32.

the whole of our knowledge is founded. Without it we could attain to no knowledge, we would be without consciousness, the whole world would be one undisturbed sameness. Now we find this law of philosophy applied by Browning to all the higher states of consciousness. His application is as courageous as it is beautiful. Even such an exalted passion of the soul as love, which he calls the best of all good, must be learned through experience of, and contrast with, hatred, or else a lower form of love.

And I yearned for no sameness but difference
In thing and thing, that should shock my sense
With a want of worth in them all, and thence
Startle me up, by an Infinite
Discovered above and below me—height
And depth alike to attract my flight,
Repel my descent: by hate taught love.⁹

Paracelsus, in that sublime flight with which
he closes his life, sees the real truth of

Love—not serenely pure,
But strong from weakness, like a chance-sown plant
Which, cast on stubborn soil, puts forth changed buds
And softer stains, unknown in happier climes.¹⁰

⁹"Rephan," XII. 259. ¹⁰"Paracelsus," I. 160.

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Even faith must be known by placing opposite, doubt. The old Pope, looking upon a church in which faith had dropped into a lethargic state, asks if he shall wish back the first thrills of dawn in the Christian era, when doubt and persecution made faith strong.

What if it be the mission of that age
My death will usher into life, to shake
This torpor of assurance from our creed,
Reintroduce the doubt discarded, bring
That formidable danger back, we drove
Long ago to the distance and the dark.¹¹

Blougram with his opportunist view of life is, nevertheless, made to give expression to many vital truths.

Here's my box—
I need the excitation of a pinch
Threatening the torpor of the inside-nose
Nigh on the imminent sneeze that never comes.
"Leave it in peace" advise the simple folk:
Make it aware of peace by itching-fits,
Say I—let doubt occasion still more faith.¹²

Every man's knowledge of himself comes from a comparison with what he is not. Suc-

¹¹"The Pope," VII. 219.

¹²"Bishop Blougram's Apology," V. 69, 70.

cess springs out of failure, joy is known only when we have experienced pain, peace is born alone out of the din of a hard-fought battle. Now, Browning did not hesitate to carry this thought to its logical conclusion, which is, that good cannot be known save by comparison with evil. If there be no evil, there could be no consciousness of good, since every state of consciousness must be produced by variety in the facts of which the mind takes notice. This, however, could not be if only an absolute good existed. The very fact that we can conceive of an absolute good is proof of the existence of evil or, as Browning puts it, the reverse:

Want was the promise of supply, defect
Ensured completion.¹³

Wherever good exists evil will be found by its side.

What know I
But proof were gained that every growth of good
Sprang consequent on evil's neighborhood?¹⁴

The aged John says:

¹³"Francis Furini," XII. 133.

¹⁴"Bernard de Mandeville," XII. 82.

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And, as I saw the sin and death, even so
See I the need yet transiency of both,
The good and glory consummated thence.¹⁵

And again the same thought is found in "Pietro of Abano":

Fair and Good are products
(So he said) of Foul and Evil; one must bring to
pass the other.
Just as poisons grow drugs, steal through sundry odd
ducts
Doctors name, and ultimately issue safe and changed.¹⁶

If there were no evil we could not know good, and *vice vèrsa*; and this would mean that man could make no choice, since he would be robbed of the power of discrimination, and the world would be non-moral. Now, a non-moral world would be a low order of creation as compared with the one we have, with all the evil in it. Nor can we take this evil to be unreal, as it certainly is not so to us, though in its final essence it may be.

Though wrong were right,
Could we but know—still wrong must needs seem
wrong

¹⁵"A Death in the Desert," V. 190.

¹⁶"Pietro of Abano," XI. 199.

To do right's service, prove men weak or strong,
Choosers of evil or of good.¹⁷

We have referred before to "Pisgah-Sights," where we are told that even though all good and evil blend in a perfect harmony, yet it would be unwise for us to see this, else we would cease to struggle.

Could I but live again,
Twice my life over,
Would I once strive again?¹⁸

The preceding chapter pointed out that so long as man is overcome by evil, just so long it will remain for him an intense reality. Growth beyond it, and power over it, will alone make it unreal to each individual. Its whole purpose would be destroyed if it should take from us our spirit of progression. What would be the good of having a mountain to climb if one possessed neither power nor spirit for the climbing? To what end would a mere semblance of evil be placed before us? There would then be no incentive to fight. Yet, evil cannot be eternal, else it would be useless to

¹⁷"Francis Furini," XII. 136.

¹⁸"Pisgah-Sights," IX. 204.

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struggle against it. We must see the intense reality of evil at the present as it affects every individual, and at the same time know that we must overcome it that it may vanish in the future. In the process of evolution, Browning hoped there would come a time when evil would not be positive evil, but only a lower form of good. This would serve the purpose of bringing good into the realm of man's consciousness by contrast.

As truth successively takes shape, one grade above
Its last presentment, tempts as it were truth indeed
Revealed this time; so tempts, till we attain to read
The signs aright, and learn, by failure, truth is forced
To manifest itself through falsehood.¹⁹

If we had no other purpose of evil presented, this would be sufficient to justify its existence, for without it we could have no moral world. Browning, however, found further justification for the existence of evil.

Probably no thought has stirred the world more during the last half century, and put more philanthropic organizations in motion, than that which is summed up in the term "Brotherhood of Man." The most vital poetry, the

¹⁹"Fifine at the Fair," IX. 162.

most appealing sermons, the truest fiction of this period, have been shot through with this idea. The conception itself is based upon the fact that men have a common heritage and a common destiny. It is the force which touches every life, that brings all together. Browning had little to say about this feeling of brotherhood as applied to the whole race; he did not often think in terms of whole classes of society; he dwelt little with the masses; he spent his thought on the individual. But he did have much to say about the bond which ties one individual to another. This bond is sympathy, which is a most pregnant term. It means far more than a simple pity; it embraces the whole range of those feelings which bring beings together, from the lowest fellowship with men up to the highest and most exalted of all ties, harmony in thought with God. This sympathy can only exist where there is something to elicit it; and suffering serves this purpose.

Tell me, now!

What were the bond 'twixt man and man, dost judge,
Pain once abolished?²⁰

²⁰"Mihrab Shah," XII. 22.

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Francis Furini asks:

How were pity understood
Unless by pain?²¹

And La Saisiaz expects an affirmative answer
to the question:

Needs there groan a world in anguish just to teach
us sympathy?²²

A certain ruling Shah has the sympathy of all
his subjects, not because he rules well, for his
power commands no respect; not because he
possesses a strong mind, for he can scarcely
count his fingers; not because he is kind, for
his insolence is notorious; but because he suf-
fers, he is on the same plane with his subjects
and wins their sympathy. The lyric to this
poem puts the thought lightly and beautifully:

So were it rightly, so shall it be!
Only, while earth we pace together
For the purpose apportioned you and me,
Closer we tread for a common tether.²³

Paracelsus, the proud but noble searcher
after truth, who despised all human love,
slighted all sympathy of men, had to pass
through many trials, endure many hardships.

²¹"Francis Furini," XII. 136. ²²"La Saisiaz," XI. 89.

²³"Mihrab Shah," XII. 25.

and suffer great disappointments, before he was able to see and meet the love in man's soul. Nothing but suffering could have caused him to call out for sympathy, and in that call to utter the great truth of his lifelong search. In the small cell of St. Sebastian's Hospital, as the clouds of a long and stormy life clear away, a transcendent moment of clear vision comes to his departing soul. He sees the glory of the universe which has in it the immanent presence of a loving God. He sees that what he once called hate was only a mask of love; that men whom he once despised were touched with nobleness; that their errors were upward tending. What a wonderful revolution this suffering has wrought in him! Instead of the proud despiser of friendship, whom we saw starting out on life's journey, we see him now, at the close of life, an humble soul, spending his last moments giving to men the words of truest counsel, and saying to his old friend with most perfect tenderness and love:

Festus, let my hand—

This hand, lie in your own, my own true friend!²⁴

²⁴"Paracelsus," I. 167.

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In the Star Rephan there was no evil, but all was perfection. There was therefore no sympathy there, no fellowship. Why should there be? There was no weary soul to comfort, no restless passion to be soothed, no sorrowing heart to cheer. Each man was complete within himself, and dwelt apart.

Each rose sole rose in a sphere that spread
Above and below and around—rose-red:
No fellowship, each for itself instead.²⁵

This fact of suffering as a bond of sympathy is well illustrated by the attitude of poorer people toward each other as compared with the attitude of the rich. Those who have had much dealing with the people in the slums affirm that there is more milk of human kindness to be found there than in the upper classes. This is doubtless due in part to a greater amount of common suffering. Browning's folk-poems present the same thought.

But pain is not alone a bond between man and man. It is a means of love from man to God. In time of much prosperity man is often self-complacent and satisfied, forgetting

²⁵"Rephan," XII. 257.

the duty he owes to his fellow-man, or the love for his heavenly Father; but let a great sorrow come into his life, and his self-centered spirit is transformed into one of sympathy for men and love for God. Browning, whose mind penetrated every emotion of man's nature, felt this most keenly.

Put pain from out the world, what room were left
For thanks to God, for love to Man?²⁶

If all of life were smooth and easy, there would be no necessity compelling man to seek a higher than himself. It is the fact of his own suffering which forces him to cry for help from One more than human. It is out of the deep experiences of sorrow and failure that we find the poor shattered soul in "Pauline" crying:

My God, my God, let me for once look on thee
As though naught else existed, we alone!²⁷

Herein also Browning finds one aspect of the truth of Christ's suffering. It was a proof of love. Somehow, we cannot quite know how, love can only be proved to be the highest through suffering. It is the final test and in

²⁶"Mihrab Shah," XII. 24. ²⁷"Pauline," I. 27.

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some sense the purest essence of love that it can, does, and must suffer. To meet this suffering in man, which arises out of evil in its various manifestations, God must show his own love through suffering, and thus draw out the love from man. The necessity for this manifestation of God's love has been dwelt on in the chapter on "The Christ." The fellowship of suffering which draws men together and points man to God, this divine passion of the soul which can alone be brought out by evil, goes far toward a justification of this scheme of the world with which we are dealing.

Finally, Browning claims that evil is a spur to the development of higher life. "The moral sense grows but by exercise," and evil is the obstacle in the overcoming of which our souls find growth. It is the constant choice between good and evil that gives our moral muscle strength. We are "stung to strength through weakness, strive for good through evil." It is this "sting that bids nor sit, nor stand, but go." Herein Browning becomes the martial poet of the centuries. To him all life is a battlefield, and the enemy marshaled thereon is

evil. The forces of the enemy are great, its resources unbounded, but he would not have the foe less powerful, since it is in conflict with the mighty that heroic characters are developed. There is throughout that glad joyousness which characterizes the great soldier. He is constantly measuring the strength of the opposition, never underestimating its power, but always full of confidence that the victory is certain. It is no funeral dirge that we find here, but the pæan of the brave as they pass forward to a desperate fight but sure triumph. There are only one or two short poems where the retreat is beaten;²⁸ everywhere else the drum sounds out a constant rally, and this rally to battle is necessary.

The Pope, reviewing the history of the Church, recognizes the fact that ease and too great success have eaten away the pristine valor of his followers. The fact that

No wild beast now prowls round the infant camp:
We have built wall and sleep in city safe,²⁹

²⁸Cf. "A Toccata of Galuppi's."

²⁹"The Pope," VII. 219.

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has caused the Church to degenerate. The overarming of the knight with silk and gold, where plain, hard steel would have better served; the making easy of the Christian life; the taking away of all conflict, has destroyed the power of the saints.

But if some earthquake try the towers that laugh
To think they once saw lions rule outside,
And man stand out again, pale, resolute,
Prepared to die—which means alive at last,⁸⁰

then there will be Christian heroes once again.

Man cannot stand idly by and watch the play of forces; if he would be heroic, he must buckle on the armor and plunge into the fight. In all of Browning's characters one does not recall a single one that has attained to strength save through the most desperate conflict. Pompilia, always the soul of purity, has not strength at first, but must win it through her long, hard struggle with the forces of evil. When we first see Caponsacchi, he is a proud, insolent, foppish priest. He was taken into the Church simply for his suave manners and his easy familiarity with the gayer circle of society.

⁸⁰"The Pope," VII. 219, 220.

He never would have been a man had there not come to him a time of great trial. It is in the midst of the play of forces of good and evil, where decisions must be made and thoughts must be put into action, that he finds a real character. When he rescued Pompilia from her cruel husband, there was

Power in the air for evil as for good,
Promptings from heaven and hell.⁸¹

Was the trial sore?

Temptation sharp? Thank God a second time,⁸²

for it is alone because of the temptation overcome that he can be called the "warrior-priest," the "soldier-saint."

Ixion, fighting against the opposing powers, attained at height beyond that of Zeus himself. We cannot but know that the speaker in "Cristiana" is nobler because of the great passion which flamed in his heart. It is the hour of a great trial as well as the hour of a struggling passion that becomes the birthday of Colombe. This leads to the further statement that it was not positive evil alone which seemed to devel-

⁸¹"The Pope," VII. 183. ⁸²*Ibid.*, VII. 199.

op, but even the relative evil which arose out of imperfection, and caused greatest pain. The more highly the life is developed the greater becomes its yearning, and rightly so. To be satisfied would be death; to look upward no longer would be to lose all power of growth. This constant dissatisfaction shows man how much of the divine there is in him. By the ever reaching upward man grows like the divine of his aspirations. But the growing soul never finds rest; rather it cries,

Only I discern—
Infinite passion, and the pain
Of finite hearts that yearn.⁸⁸

Paracelsus's great charm of character comes from this insatiable thirst of his soul, which assures us he must succeed. Not all the failures that his life could meet, nor all the discouragements that beset his way, could destroy the success of his quest, so long as he held this lamp of God close to his breast. Unrest in the heart of the inhabitant of Rephan set his soul growing.

⁸⁸"Two in the Campagna," IV. 106.

When the trouble grew in my pregnant breast
A voice said, "So wouldst thou strive, not rest?
Burn and not smoulder, win by worth,
Not rest content with a wealth that's dearth?"²⁴

The question comes just here whether sin develops character. If so, would Browning claim sin to be necessary to character? We have mentioned in another connection that many readers of his poetry believe he does uphold sin. After going through all his poetry with this thought in mind, we must say that we cannot find any references which sustain such a view. It may be necessary to quote again the one regarding Pompilia, which, however, needs no further comment:

A soul made weak by its pathetic want
Of just the first apprenticeship to sin
Which thenceforth makes the sinning soul secure
From all foes save itself, souls' truest foe,—
Since egg turned snake needs fear no serpentry.²⁵

This certainly is no defense of sin. There is a place in the Pope's speech where sin and sorrow are said to be joined in the development

²⁴"Rephan," XII. 259, 260.

²⁵"The Book and the Ring," VII. 320.

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of character,⁸⁶ but this does not represent the real attitude of the Pope toward sin. There is also a passage in "Paracelsus" where the speaker thinks he may love God better because of sin;⁸⁷ but if this sin is that of his own life, it refers simply to experience and not to transgression. In either case it is not the sin, but God's mercy, which creates the greater love.

Of the young man who makes his confession to Pauline we are told that sin has destroyed his soul. After he had indulged in uncleanness and sin of all kinds, he confesses

I would lose
All this gay mastery of mind, to sit
Once more with them, trusting in truth and love
And with an aim,—not being what I am.⁸⁸

The outright sinning soul does not grow. Sin did not develop Ottima or Sebald or Chiappino. Guido and his accomplices are damned by it. It causes a great tragedy without compensation in "A Blot in the 'Scutcheon." It universally acts as a blight. Browning, however, does say that it may awaken a soul.

⁸⁶"The Pope," VII. 205. ⁸⁷"Paracelsus," I. 157.

⁸⁸"Pauline," I. 4.

Thus in the little poem "The Statue and the Bust" we are told that a sin will serve as well for a test as anything else. Paracelsus tells us that sin causes a rude shock at times; and in various other poems sin may bring a character to the realization of weakness. But this is neither a defense of sinners nor a palliation of sin. The possibility of sin is necessary to the existence of moral beings, but the choosing of it is neither necessary nor uplifting. On the other hand, it is the overcoming of the impulse to sin that makes for character. The fact that a man sins is proof that he has not fought a good fight; he has remained passive before temptation. Evil has not proved a spur to drive him on to victory, but has become a canker in his heart eating away the strength of his being. It is the fight that counts.

When the fight begins within himself,
A man's worth something. God stoops o'er his head,
Satan looks up between his feet—both tug—
He's left, himself, i' the middle: the soul wakes
And grows. Prolong that battle through his life!
Never leave growing till the life to come.²⁹

²⁹"Bishop Blougram's Apology," V. 70.

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When a man loses a battle by giving way to temptation, he has in so far ruined his soul. But to him who can overcome, a blessing of new strength is found in the very fact of the struggle. Without it our lives would be passive and non-moral, and yielding to it we become immoral; neither of which is good.

Why comes temptation but for man to meet
And master and make crouch beneath his foot,
And so be pedestaled in triumph? Pray
"Lead us into no such temptations, Lord!"
Yea, but, O Thou whose servants are the bold,
Lead such temptations by the head and hair,
Reluctant dragons, up to who dares fight,
That so he may do battle and have praise!⁴⁰

Unwillingness to meet this condition of strife constitutes for Browning the unpardonable sin. To live is to meet squarely the issues of life; to fight a good fight; to give the soul full sweep in its desire to overcome. The thing to be overcome, whether great or small, makes little difference. To those souls which acted in spite of opposition the poet gives unstinted praise. The Duchess who escaped from her husband's home, that she might find larger life

⁴⁰"The Pope," VII. 199.

in a gypsy camp, did well; for she acted, even though her act was a violation of conventional morality. Even the wild leap of Miranda from the tower is approved. It destroyed his life, but it proved his soul. It is Caponsacchi as soldier-saint that we admire, and not as priest. Our souls are inspired by the picture of the venerable Pope, just ready to depart this life, standing armed with Paul's sword as well as Peter's key, and saying with his last breath,

I smite

With my whole strength once more, ere end my part,
Ending, so far as man may, this offense.⁴¹

A life that is active, even though it may blunder, is better than passive innocence.

As it was better, youth

Should strive, through acts uncouth,

Toward making, than repose on aught found made.⁴²

What difference if we do fall sometimes? Is it not the very fact that we have fallen that makes us rise to fight better? Is not all walking a constant effort to overcome our falling? Is not all progress upward a struggle to over-

⁴¹"The Pope," VII. 222.

⁴²"Rabbi Ben Ezra," V. 179.

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come an opposite tendency? Growth, and not stagnation, is the aim of life.

I say that man was made to grow, not stop.⁴³

Man must pass from old to new,
From vain to real, from mistake to fact,
From what once seemed good, to what now proves
best."⁴⁴

Progression is the distinctive work of man. The beast does not grow. There is no struggle in his life, no choice between good and evil. Doubt frets not the maw-crammed beast; care irks not the crop-full bird. They are of a lower order. They have not been given the high privilege of choice. They are complete. Man partly is and wholly hopes to be.

A spark disturbs our clod;
Nearer we hold of God
Who gives, than of His tribes that take, I must believe.⁴⁵

Good for the animal kingdom is purely physical and can find perfection, but goodness for man is moral and can never be complete. It is rather the ever-increasing realization of a divine perfection. Even though perfection can never actually be ours, if evil speeds us on

⁴³"A Death in the Desert," V. 196. ⁴⁴*Ibid.*, V. 200.

⁴⁵"Rabbi Ben Ezra," V. 176.

our way toward that high ideal, it is well. If this earth is just a place for learning how to realize goodness, then it is by no means a failure. We can readily bear the pangs of sorrow for a few years, if thereby we gain momentum in our movement toward God.

Life is probation and the earth no goal,
But starting-point of man: compel him strive,
Which means, in man, as good as reach the goal.⁴⁶

Over and over again we are told that life is but a pupil's place. It is not the end of all, it cannot be.

There is no reconciling wisdom with a world distraught,
Goodness, with triumphant evil, power with failure in the aim,
If you bar me from assuming earth to be a pupil's place.⁴⁷

But if this be assumed—as indeed it was—

I acquiesce

In this present life as failure, count misfortune's worst assaults
Triumph, not defeat, assured that loss so much the more exalts
Gain about to be.⁴⁸

⁴⁶"The Pope," VII. 207.

⁴⁷"La Saisiaz," XI. 86. ⁴⁸*Ibid.*, XI. 91.

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We are told in "Abt Vogler" that every thought worth while, every power gained here, every note of melody which has gone forth, shall await us in the future. More than this, all that we have willed or even hoped or dreamed of good shall be stored up for our enjoyment in the life beyond. How else shall this be, save as all these forces of the divine find lodgment in our character?

I search but cannot see

What purpose serves the ~~soul that strives~~, or world it tries

Conclusions with, unless the fruit of victories
Stay, one and all, stored up and guaranteed its own
Forever, by some mode whereby shall be made known
The gain of every life. Death reads the title clear—
What each soul for itself conquered from out things
here.⁴⁰

Earth is a place of training; and the development of a soul, as we are told in the preface to "Sordello," is the only subject worthy of study. The discord of life's music rushes in that we may prize the harmony more. The pause comes that singing may issue forth with greater beauty. Freed from the battle with

⁴⁰"Fifne at the Fair," IX. 106.

sin, we will, with a strength gained through conflict, rejoice the more in the higher progression after we leave this earth.

If, then, we are right in our interpretation, Browning says that evil makes man conscious of good through comparison with evil, either positive or relative, and hence arises the possibility of moral action through the fact of choice between these two. It teaches man sympathy for all mankind. He could never know that passion of brotherliness which it is possible for all men to know, were it not for evil. Nor could he find his way up to God, if the divinity of suffering had not led him on. Indeed, he would not even know love, the highest of all good, were it not for the existence of evil in the form of a lower love. But what is more, after he knew of love he could not experience it save when taught by suffering. Evil has made him yearn for something more than his present attainment. It has made him go beyond his dead life to better life. It has urged him to a desperate struggle which alone can give strength. The burning thirst for life which it has awakened has projected him on a

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career of endless progress which shall never find a resting place, though it shall ever approach nearer and nearer to the divine. All this being true, can we not find a reconciliation of evil with a principle of divine love? Because God is love, he has made the earth just as it is. The purposes of life could not be realized without evil, and hence we can come back to an all-wise, all-powerful, all-loving Father. So long as man sees that evil is evil, hates it and fights it, a philosophy of optimism will be possible. All cannot be bad so long as this is true. For the very fact that man hates evil is the surest condemnation of the theory of the pessimist. This hatred of evil could only come from an exalted moral sense, and this moral sense cannot be the creation of man's own heart. Man has no power to create and change, else he would change this order of evil, which he hates. But if God created this moral sense in man, and has not a corresponding feeling, the creature becomes more noble than the Creator, which cannot be. Hence, in spite of the fact that we may not be able to see the full meaning of this mystery, we are

brought again to the conclusion that love is the ruling principle of the world.

Should not the heart beat once "How good to live and learn?"

Not once beat "Praise be Thine!"

I see the whole design,

I, who saw power, see now love perfect too;

Perfect I call Thy plan;

Thanks that I was a man!

Maker, remake, complete,—I trust what Thou shalt do!⁵⁰

Thus Browning's message was one of optimism, an optimism based on the essential divinity of man: divinity, to be sure, in its formative stage, but capable of endless development. When Browning's logic ended in nescience, he fell back upon this supreme fact of the divine in man's nature. It was because of this intrinsic value of man that it was worth while to fight, for victory was ahead. A message of struggle and hope was the great need of Browning's time. Lack of faith, and the breaking down of traditional belief, had destroyed hope and paralyzed the arm of many a moral soldier. To restore confidence in the

⁵⁰"Rabbi Ben Ezra," V. 177.

